PAYASVINEE

Reflections on Life, Society, Culture and Literature

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by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Original Maithili Collection by

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Translated into English

by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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An English Translation of the Maithili Collection Payasvinee
Authored by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Dr Ram Ashish Singh

Payasvinee brings together Jagdish Prasad Mandal's essays, addresses, interviews and dialogues on society, culture, literature and lived experience. Rooted in Mithila, the volume ranges across religious belief, social custom, folk tradition, caste, cultural dominance, marginalised communities, language, education and literary responsibility. Mandal approaches these subjects not as isolated themes, but as interconnected parts of a social world shaped by village life, agriculture, labour, memory and struggle.

The book is marked by a questioning, socially engaged voice. It examines inherited assumptions against everyday experience, reflects on the distance between cultural ideals and social realities, and asks what literature owes to those whose lives remain outside dominant narratives. Alongside these reflections are accounts of literary gatherings, recollections of writers and editors, and conversations on creativity, readership, criticism and the writer's relation to society.

At its core, Payasvinee presents literature as a living social responsibility. Its strength lies in the close movement between thought, experience and responsibility. Deeply rooted in Mithila yet open to wider human concerns, it invites readers to question certainties, recognise neglected realities and imagine a more humane social consciousness.

Published by: Pallavi Prakashan
Tulsi Bhawan, Nehru Marg, Ward no. 06, Nirmali, District: Supaul, Bihar: 847452

First Edition: 2026
ISBN: Applied For
Price: 299/-
Copyright: © Pallavi Prakashan
Printed by: Manav Art (Pallavi Prakashan)
Typesetting: Dr. Umesh Mandal, umeshberma@gmail.com
Cover Design: Mrs. Poonam Mandal, Nirmali, Supaul, Bihar- 847452

Website: http://pallavipublication.blogspot.com
Email: pallavi.publication.nirmali@gmail.com
Mobile: +91 99316 54742, +91 62006 35563
Font Source: Google Fonts

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Dedication

To those whose labour, memory and questions sustain society; to the voices too often left at its margins; and to every reader who believes that literature must remain answerable to life.

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Preface

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Some books are read for what they tell us; others remain with us because they alter the direction of our questions. **Payasvinee** belongs more naturally to the second kind. It does not offer the comfort of settled conclusions. Again and again, it returns the reader to the difficult ground where belief meets reason, tradition encounters experience, culture confronts power, and literature is asked to justify its relationship with life.

Yet to describe **Payasvinee** merely as a book of questions would be to miss its deeper impulse. Jagdish Prasad Mandal questions because he believes in the human capacity to understand, to act and to change. Behind his criticism of inherited belief, social hierarchy, cultural dominance and literary complacency lies an essentially constructive conviction: human beings must awaken their own strength, recognise their responsibility and participate consciously in the making of a more humane social world. Literature, in this understanding, is neither an ornament of culture nor an escape from life. It is one of the means by which consciousness may be widened and responsibility made more alert.

At first sight, the volume appears remarkably diverse. It moves from the doctrine of divine incarnation to **samskara** and folk song, from dominant culture and marginalised communities to literary gatherings, from the geography and

economy of Mithila to the life of an editor, and from public addresses to extended conversations on creativity, language, society and the writer's responsibility. Yet beneath this diversity runs a single current. Mandal is concerned with the human being as a social, moral and thinking presence. His recurring question is not merely what society has inherited, but what that inheritance has done to human life and what human beings must now do with it.

Mandal writes from within Mithila, not from a picturesque distance. His Mithila is not merely the land of celebrated poets, philosophers, rituals and cultural memory. It is also a land of rivers and silt, flood and drought, farming and migration, caste and labour, unequal possession and unequal opportunity. It contains inherited wisdom, but also inherited wounds. It preserves forms of collective memory while carrying structures that have kept many lives outside cultural visibility. His attachment to this world does not require him to idealise it. On the contrary, the freedom to question what one deeply belongs to gives **Payasvinee** much of its intellectual force.

The opening essay, devoted to the doctrine of divine incarnation, establishes the tone with unusual directness. Mandal subjects inherited religious narratives to the tests of reason, moral consistency and human experience. If God is compassionate, omnipresent and just, he asks, how should narratives of deception, killing and conquest be understood? If the universe functions through its own material laws, how far should natural events be explained through supernatural intervention? The significance of these questions is not confined to theology. Behind them stands a larger concern with human agency. Fear, dependence and inherited authority,

in Mandal's view, should not displace knowledge, ethical conduct and responsibility.

This questioning spirit should not be mistaken for a simple rejection of tradition. Elsewhere in the volume, Mandal turns with evident sensitivity towards **samskara**, folk song and the cultural memory of Mithila. What changes is the manner of looking. A tradition is not valuable merely because it is old, nor does questioning it make it worthless. It must be understood in relation to history, society and the human purposes it serves. Mandal therefore asks whether practices associated with particular social groups can automatically be described as the culture of Mithila as a whole. At the same time, when he speaks of **samskara** songs, his language acquires warmth. Women singing together, melodies passing from one voice to another, changes in **bhanita**, and songs travelling across generations reveal a culture whose vitality lies precisely in its living movement.

Oral tradition consequently becomes one of the most significant presences in **Payasvinee**. It preserves more than music. It carries memory, social experience and forms of knowledge that formal histories have often neglected. Mandal's reflections on women's songs are particularly suggestive. Where access to formal learning was historically restricted, oral culture could become an alternative space of transmission. A song sung in a courtyard or at a life-cycle ceremony may therefore contain a history of feeling, memory and social understanding that no official archive has adequately preserved.

From here, the movement towards the question of dominant culture is natural. Mandal repeatedly asks who

receives the authority to represent society as a whole. When the life of one section becomes identified with the culture of an entire region, what happens to those who stand outside that section? What happens when the language of prestige becomes detached from the speech of ordinary people? What kind of literature emerges when a large part of society remains visible in life but nearly invisible in literary representation?

These questions lead to one of the central concerns of the volume: the relationship between literature and society. Mandal accepts the familiar idea that literature is a mirror of society, but he refuses to leave the metaphor at the level of surface reflection. An ordinary mirror may show the visible body; literature must reveal the inner person as well. Mind, judgement, suffering, aspiration and conflict belong to the truth of human life no less than outward circumstance. Literature, for him, is therefore not passive reflection. It is a form of seeing that may connect past and present, individual and community, experience and understanding.

This also explains Mandal's insistence that literature Should remain close to lived reality. He sees danger in imagination when it becomes detached from life, but he sees an equal danger in a merely factual representation that lacks imaginative depth. Reality provides the ground; imagination enables the writer to reach its wider meaning. The writer must begin from what has been seen, endured and understood, yet the work must travel beyond the immediate event towards the larger human truth concealed within it.

The village therefore occupies a central position in Mandal's intellectual and creative world. It is never presented as a sentimental emblem of simplicity. The village is a dense

social field. Within it stand land and landlessness, caste and dependency, labour and ownership, kinship and conflict, memory and change. Mandal has experienced this world not merely as an observer but as a cultivator and participant. Agriculture consequently enters his thought with a depth that cannot be reduced to rural background.

In **Payasvinee**, soil becomes history. Rivers become social forces. Flood, drought and erosion become questions of livelihood, policy and human organisation. Landownership reveals structures of power; irrigation reveals social and political priorities; improved seed records technological change; migration reveals economic imbalance. Even the philosophical temperament of Mithila is approached at times through its everyday intelligence, through the ability to draw sustenance and meaning from a demanding landscape.

This intimacy with the material world gives Mandal's social criticism its particular character. He does not usually begin with abstraction and then search for examples. He moves in the opposite direction. A field, a ritual, a village institution, a marriage practice, a literary gathering, a journal, a flood or a remembered conversation becomes the point from which a wider argument opens. Thought rises from experience, and experience is returned to society in the form of thought.

The sections dealing with literary gatherings and personalities deepen this understanding of literature as collective labour. The account of **Sagar Rati Deep Jaray** is not simply a record of programmes, stories and writers. It raises questions about literary fellowship, criticism, institutional responsibility and the criteria by which an age

evaluates its own creative work. Similarly, the portrait of Rajnandan Lal Das becomes more than a biographical remembrance. Through his work as organiser, editor and supporter of publications, the reader sees the often-invisible labour that sustains a literary culture.

This is one of the quieter insights of **Payasvinee**: books do not live through writers alone. Around literature stands a community of editors, publishers, readers, organisers, critics, institutions and committed individuals who create the conditions in which a language can sustain a public life. Mandal's repeated references to journals, literary programmes and cultural workers are therefore not incidental memories. They belong to his larger conception of literature as social activity and service.

The interviews and dialogues in the latter half of the volume bring the reader still closer to Mandal's creative self-understanding. Here the connection between life and literature becomes explicit. His serious engagement with writing began comparatively late, after decades shaped by agriculture, public struggle and village life. He describes a movement from struggle on the ground towards a struggle of ideas. The formulation is crucial. Material conditions may be altered through social and political action, but the transformation of consciousness requires another kind of labour. Literature becomes one of its instruments.

What gives this idea particular weight is the manner in which Mandal understands creative labour itself. He does not treat writing as an activity separate from ordinary life or as a privilege that must wait for ideal conditions. Livelihood and literature, in his account, are two forms of work within the

same life, one economic and the other intellectual. Each receives its allotted time. Regularity is therefore not merely a habit of productivity; it is part of his understanding of responsibility. The work available in the present must be done in the present.

This attitude also explains why continuity matters more to him than an elaborate vision of personal literary achievement. He repeatedly resists the temptation to make the future into a storehouse of ambitions. The future, in his view, grows out of present action. Opportunity too is not simply something granted by institutions or circumstances. A writer must recognise what already exists within society and create further opportunity through labour, observation and vision. Such an understanding places creative responsibility first upon the writer himself.

There is a quiet form of renunciation in this discipline. Mandal does not deny the importance of criticism, institutions, honours or awards, but he refuses to make them the condition of creative labour. Time, he believes, remains the larger evaluator. Greed, factionalism and excessive dependence upon recognition can weaken the independence necessary for serious writing. The writer must therefore cultivate an independent life and an independent mind, not for isolation, but for the purpose that both society and literature may be served without surrendering judgement to immediate reward.

Service, in this sense, is not a decorative word in Mandal's thought. It joins labour, responsibility and freedom. His concern for those who have remained outside dominant literary attention grows from the same ground. He repeatedly

identifies the oppressed, the deprived and the socially neglected as central to his creative field. His purpose, however, is not merely to replace one literary centre with another. He is asking literature to widen its vision. A society cannot be understood if only its secure and culturally authorised sections are represented.

This is why the relationship between seeing and consciousness becomes so important in **Payasvinee**. A reality may stand directly before us and still remain invisible if the mind has never recognised it as worthy of attention. Literature, alters that field of attention. It brings the overlooked into visibility, not as an object of pity, but as part of the social truth from which no serious account of human life can remain separate.

Mandal's reflections on Maithili emerge from the same principle. His confidence in the language is neither defensive nor ornamental. Maithili, for him, belongs to the people who live through it. Its future cannot be secured by praise alone. Language must remain connected with society, and literature must move with changing life. A language that grew from the speech of ordinary people cannot preserve its vitality by becoming the possession of a narrow circle. Nor can literature remain excessively turned towards the past while the social world around it changes.

This does not mean that Mandal proposes a severance from history. His position is more demanding than that. The past must be remembered, understood and learnt from, but it must not become a substitute for the present. His advice to younger writers expresses this with memorable economy: do not forget the past, but make the present your life. That

statement may be read as one of the governing principles of **Payasvinee** itself.

Independence in Mandal's thought therefore has several meanings. There is political independence, but there is also intellectual and creative independence. A writer must be free enough to question inherited authority, contemporary power, literary factionalism and his own assumptions. Yet independence does not lead towards isolation. Mandal repeatedly values dialogue. Differences of thought are natural and often necessary. The danger begins when difference turns into hostility, exclusion or groupism. Literary culture grows when disagreement remains open to conversation and when a concern for literature and society survives beneath divergent positions.

For this reason, **Payasvinee** is best read neither as a doctrinal statement nor as a collection demanding assent. A work so committed to questioning would be diminished by passive agreement. Readers may accept some of Mandal's historical interpretations, contest others and remain undecided about still others. Such responses are not failures of reading. They are part of the intellectual encounter the book itself invites. Its significance lies not in asking the reader to repeat Mandal's conclusions, but in asking the reader to examine the grounds upon which conclusions are formed.

Translation presents a particular challenge when a work is rooted so deeply in a specific social and linguistic world. Terms such as **samskara, mainjani, marwa, chaur, kattha** and others do not carry only lexical meanings. They contain histories of usage, social memory and local association. To replace every such word with a convenient English equivalent

might make the surface smoother while making the cultural world beneath it thinner. I have therefore tried, wherever necessary, to allow English to make room for Mithila rather than forcing Mithila to disappear into English. The glossary is intended to assist the reader in entering that world without dissolving its particularity.

Translation, after all, is not simply the replacement of one language by another. It is an encounter. Thought must cross, but the soil from which that thought has risen should not be shaken entirely from its roots. The translator's task is therefore double: to make the work intelligible in another language and, at the same time, to preserve enough of its original texture for the reader to feel that another cultural world has genuinely been entered.

In this respect, Mandal's own understanding of translation is especially relevant. Literature may arise within a particular language and region, but it does not remain the property of that region alone. When it moves into another language, it carries with it something of the social, economic and intellectual life from which it emerged. Translation consequently becomes not merely a linguistic transfer but an enlargement of literary experience.

This English **Payasvinee** is offered in that spirit. Its immediate world is Mithila, yet many of its questions travel far beyond regional boundaries. Who has the authority to define culture? Whose life becomes visible in literature? How should inherited belief face reason? What happens when material change outruns moral and social change? What responsibility does a writer bear towards those left outside dominant narratives? How can a language remain rooted

without becoming imprisoned in its past? And how may sustained individual labour become a form of responsibility towards a larger community?

Across essays, addresses, recollections and conversations, one current continues to flow: human beings must participate consciously in the making of their own world. Knowledge must lead towards responsibility; independence must make service possible; criticism must open the way to understanding; and labour must continue without waiting for perfect circumstances or immediate reward. In this sense, the life behind the thought and the thought within the writing are not separate. Mandal's insistence upon regular work, self-reliance and continuity gives practical form to the principles that his writings repeatedly place before society.

Payasvinee, then, is not merely a collection of writings. It is a sustained conversation between experience and thought, inheritance and change, village and world, writer and society. Above all, it is a conversation between literature and life. Its pages do not ask the reader simply to receive a world already interpreted. They ask us to look again, think again, recognise what has remained unseen, and consider what responsibility begins once we have learnt to see.

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The Doctrine of Divine Incarnation

The Living Being and God

☰

Whoever assumes a body and later relinquishes it, whoever is born and dies, belongs to the world of mortal beings. God, by contrast, is understood to be omnipresent, omnipotent and the protector of all. According to the attributes ascribed to God in the scriptures, He is also the sustainer of every living being. Cruelty, therefore, cannot belong to His nature, for He is said to be infinitely compassionate. And if He is present everywhere, why should He need to come from one place or go to another?

The question then arises: why did He assume the forms of a fish and a tortoise? What purpose required Him to appear in such forms? Why should He have taken the Matsya incarnation and killed Shankhasura when He Himself is the protector of all, omnipresent and infinitely compassionate? Why should He bear enmity towards anyone? Why should He become a boar, wrest the earth from Hiranyaksha and carry it in His mouth? Is the earth like a child's ball that He could hold in His mouth while standing upon some other earth, fighting Hiranyaksha and finally killing him?

Nor does the matter end there. As Narasimha, He is said to have burst through an iron pillar, torn open Hiranyakashipu and killed him. Are we then to call God the greatest killer of all? In the form of Vamana, He asked King Bali for three paces of land and then took possession of his entire kingdom. Are we to regard Him as the greatest deceiver in the world? What fruit may come from worshipping such a deceiver is something we can judge for ourselves. Begging belongs to helpless and dependent human beings caught in worldly illusion, not to one who is industrious and possessed of divine abundance.

Seen in this light, it appears that illusion, imagination and ignorance have bewildered the human mind. Nor is this all. As Parashurama, He is said to have massacred the Haihaya Kshatriyas twenty-one times. If an entire lineage had been destroyed once, where did the Kshatriyas come from again, and then again, so that the slaughter could be repeated twenty-one times?

The creator of the infinite universe is then said to have become Rama, the son of Dasharatha, and to have married Sita. When she was abducted, He wandered weeping and asking trees and plants where she had gone. He even had a bridge of stone built across a boundless sea. These are only a few among the many questions that deserve serious thought. We possess the mature consciousness of the twenty-first century, not the childlike consciousness of the sixteenth.

Before there was a true understanding of the world as a reality composed of matter and consciousness, certain people constructed the idea of God as the creator of the universe. Later, in pursuit of their own interests, they imagined a succession of divine incarnations. But are deception, coercion

and the corruption of the character of ascetics and virtuous women the work of God? These are the acts of scheming human beings.

More than that, blood has been shed in the name of God. Nor has it been only the blood of creatures other than humans. Silent and innocent human beings too have been killed. The poor have always suffered at the hands of the powerful, whether that power came from wealth, physical strength, learning or some other source. The same thing continues to happen before our eyes, day and night.

In the **Shrimad Bhagavata**, Skandha I, Chapter 3, verses 5 to 25, the doctrine of divine incarnation is explained through a series of manifestations:

1. Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara, for the practice of celibacy;

2. the Boar, to bring the earth back from the netherworld;

3. Narada, as a teacher;

4. Nara-Narayana, for the practice of austerity;

5. Kapila, to teach Sankhya philosophy;

6. Dattatreya, as a teacher;

7. Yajna, born to Akuti, wife of Ruchi Prajapati, for the protection of the Svayambhuva Manvantara;

8. Rishabhadeva, to exemplify the ideal of the **paramahamsa**;

9. Prithu, to draw medicinal herbs from the earth;

10. Matsya, to rescue the submerged earth and recover the Vedas stolen by Shankhasura, whom the Fish incarnation

killed;

11. Kurma, to assist in the churning of the ocean;

12. Dhanvantari, who appeared from the ocean bearing a vessel of nectar;

13. Mohini, to settle the dispute between the gods and the demons;

14. Narasimha, to kill Hiranyakashipu;

15. Vamana, to deceive Bali;

16. Parashurama, for the mass killing of the Kshatriyas;

17. Vyasa, to divide the Vedas;

18. Shri Rama, to kill Ravana;

19–20. Balarama and Krishna, to relieve the earth of its burden;

19. Buddha;

20. Kalki, who is to appear when rulers have largely degenerated into plunderers.

Alongside these twenty-two incarnations, other scriptures also refer to Hamsa and Hayagriva. Hamsa appears in connection with answering the questions of Sanaka and the other sages, while Hayagriva is associated with the killing of Madhu and Kaitabha.

The earliest conception of the doctrine of incarnation is found in the **Shatapatha Brahmana.** Hermann Jacobi discusses the subject in "Incarnation (Indian)" in the **Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics**, Vol. VII. Monier Monier-Williams also refers to it in **Indian Wisdom**, p. 381, while Hemchandra Raychaudhuri discusses it in **Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect**,

p. 96.

In the beginning, Prajapati occupied a more important place than Vishnu. According to the **Shatapatha Brahmana**, it was Prajapati who assumed the forms of Matsya, the Fish (1/8/1/1), Kurma, the Tortoise (7/5/1/5), and Varaha, the Boar (14/1/2/11). The story of Prajapati in the form of the Boar also appears in an early form in the **Taittiriya Samhita** (7/1/5/1), the **Taittiriya Brahmana** (1/1/3/6), the **Taittiriya Aranyaka** (10/1/8) and the **Kathaka Samhita** (8/1). Dr Kamil Bulke discusses this in paragraph 140 of **Ramkatha**.

It is therefore evident that the Matsya, Kurma and Varaha incarnations were originally associated with Prajapati. Only later, as the importance of Vishnu increased, were all three linked with Vishnu. The **Narayaniya Upakhyana** of the **Mahabharata** (12/326/72 and 12/337) and the **Harivamsha Purana** (4/41) came to recognise a connection between Varaha and Vishnu. In time, separate Mahapuranas were composed in the names of these forms, and their association with Vishnu was firmly established.

The Vamana and Narasimha incarnations, however, were connected with Vishnu from the beginning. Vamana is mentioned in the **Taittiriya Samhita** (2/2/3/1), the **Shatapatha Brahmana** (1/2/5/5), the **Taittiriya Brahmana** (1/7/17) and the **Aitareya Brahmana** (6/3/7). References also occur in the **Narayaniya Upakhyana** (12/326/73) and the **Harivamsha Purana** (1/41). The story of Narasimha is also narrated in the **Vishnu Purana** (1/16).

No early account of Parashurama as an incarnation appears to be available. Later, however, the **Narayaniya Upakhyana** (12/326/77), the **Harivamsha Purana**

(1/41/112/120) and the **Vishnu Purana** (1/9/143) came to recognise him as an incarnation of Vishnu.

Thus, although the idea of divine incarnation was present in ancient literature, it did not initially give rise to any widespread practice of worship, nor had Vishnu yet acquired supreme importance. A significant change began with the emergence of Krishna as an incarnation. From that point onwards, the doctrine became increasingly bound to devotional faith and gradually developed into the form in which it is known today.

Vasudeva Krishna was the chosen deity of the Bhagavata tradition. In the beginning, he was not associated with Vishnu. According to Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, the idea of the identity of Vasudeva Krishna and Vishnu began to emerge in the third century BCE.

Buddhism, too, became part of the historical process through which the doctrine of incarnation developed. Buddhism and the devotional path of the Bhagavata tradition arose and grew, in similar ways, as responses to the ritualism and sacrificial practices that dominated Brahmanical religion. As a consequence, the Brahmins' exclusive authority in religious life began to weaken. With Buddhism spreading ever more widely, supporters of the Bhagavata tradition sought to draw people towards themselves by identifying Vasudeva Krishna, their chosen deity, as an incarnation of Vishnu-Narayana. The **Taittiriya Aranyaka** (10/1/6) contains what is described here as the earliest reference to the identity of Vasudeva and Vishnu.

This gave considerable strength to the doctrine of incarnation. At the same time, the importance of Vishnu

continued to grow. Gradually, the entire idea of divine incarnation came to centre upon Vishnu-Narayana, and the deeds associated in Vedic literature with various other divine manifestations came to be attributed to Vishnu.

While the doctrine of incarnation was developing in one direction, the ideal character of Rama was gaining an increasingly powerful hold upon the popular imagination. As the Ramayana tradition expanded, Rama's importance also grew rapidly, and accounts of his heroism acquired an ever greater supernatural dimension. Ravana came to stand for sin and evil, while Rama emerged as the embodiment of virtue and righteous conduct. The result was that Rama, like Krishna, was eventually placed among the incarnations of Vishnu. It appears that Rama began to be regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu from around the first century BCE. The **Mahabharata**, as well as the **Vayu**, **Brahmanda**, **Vishnu**, **Matsya** and **Harivamsha Puranas**, includes Rama among the incarnations.

The earliest conception of the doctrine of incarnation is found in the **Shatapatha Brahmana**, a work considered here to date from about a thousand years before Christ. It says that Prajapati assumed the forms of a fish, a tortoise and a boar. These accounts appear to be products of pure imagination.

The conception of Vamana as an incarnation occurs in the **Taittiriya Samhita**, which is likewise regarded here as dating from about a thousand years before Christ. The idea of Vamana is also said to have developed from the final six mantras of the twenty-second hymn of the first Mandala of the **Rigveda**. Two of those verses read:

idaṃ viṣṇur vi cakrame tredhā ni dadhe padam

samūḷham asya pāṃsure.

trīṇi padā vi cakrame viṣṇur gopā adābhyaḥ

ato dharmāṇi dhārayan.

(**Rigveda** 1.22.17–18; commentary cited by Ramgovind Trivedi.)

Vishnu here is understood as a symbol of the sun, and his rays as his feet. Their light falls upon the earth, the intermediate realm and the celestial world. This illumination of the three realms is understood as Vishnu's three strides. This interpretation is familiar within the Vedic tradition. In later times, however, a story was woven around this idea and it developed into the tale of Vishnu as Vamana.

According to that tale, Vishnu became Vamana, deceived King Bali, asked him for three paces of land and then took possession of his entire kingdom. The question therefore arises: how did people come to accept such a deceiver as God? According to the Puranas, Vishnu is described as the younger brother of Indra. He deceived Bali in order to restore the throne of his elder brother, Indra.

Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana and Parashurama were all counted among the incarnations, yet none of them became widely worshipped. It was only towards the later end of the tradition that Rama and Krishna emerged as objects of worship.

In fact, the doctrine of incarnation developed as a response to the Shramana traditions of Buddhism and Jainism and to what may be described as the doctrine of ascent. Mahavira and the Buddha were great human beings. Ascent means an ordinary living being rising above the ordinary condition, whereas **avatara** means a great or higher being descending from above.

According to the doctrine of incarnation, the Supreme Being descends and becomes an ordinary human being. Krishna was the first to be accepted as an incarnation, and the idea reached its fuller development in the Krishna of the **Gita**. Until then, Rama had not entered the category of divine incarnations. He was regarded simply as a heroic archer. The author of the **Gita** makes Krishna say of Rama:

Rāmaḥ śastrabhṛtām aham.

"Among those who bear weapons, I am Rama."

Up to about a hundred years before Christ, Rama and his three brothers were regarded only as partial manifestations of Vishnu. The idea of Rama as the complete Supreme Brahman began, after the beginning of the Christian era, with the **Adhyatma Ramayana**. Seen in this light, there was no room for the fully developed doctrine of incarnation in the Vedas; it developed later.

The question then arises: what, in fact, is the doctrine of incarnation?

The universe extends infinitely through space and time. Its two fundamental constituents are matter and consciousness, each possessing its own inherent qualities and laws. Through these, the order of the universe has continued uninterrupted from time immemorial. To imagine another God apart from this reality is to depart from fact.

We are told, for instance, that there was a demon named Shankhasura. He went to Brahma, stole the Vedas and hid them in the sea. To recover them, Vishnu assumed the Matsya incarnation, entered the sea, killed Shankhasura and brought the Vedas back. But a question immediately follows: is killing the work of God? If God is all-knowing and compassionate,

can such conduct belong to Him? A truly divine being would transform another through righteous inspiration rather than through killing.

The story of Hiranyaksha raises a similar difficulty. Hiranyaksha is said to have stolen the earth and hidden it in a pit. Vishnu then assumed the form of a boar, lifted the earth out with his snout, killed Hiranyaksha and brought the earth back, thereby rescuing it. But if the earth itself had been stolen, where could it have been hidden? The earth, after all, sustains itself through its own gravitational force.

The story of Hiranyakashipu and Prahlada is of the same kind. Prahlada was a devotee of Vishnu, something Hiranyakashipu did not approve of, and so he had Prahlada bound. Seeing Prahlada's suffering, God, in the form of Vishnu, assumed a composite form of man and lion, burst out of a pillar and killed Hiranyakashipu. The question arises again: God burst from a pillar for the sake of one Prahlada, but why does His sleep remain undisturbed in the face of Genghis Khan, Nadir Shah, adulterators, hoarders, bribe-takers and exploiters?

As Vamana, He begged from Bali. Begging and deception are the acts of deluded human beings, not of God.

If Parashurama massacred the Haihaya Kshatriya lineage once, whom did he kill the second and third time, and then again and again until the number reached twenty-one? If such killers are to be called God, whom are we to call a criminal?

The creator of the infinite universe is then said to descend as Rama, the son of Dasharatha, and marry Sita. When Sita is abducted, He weeps and asks the trees and plants

where she has gone. Krishna comes to Vrindavan to graze cattle and joins women in the **rasa**. Are these the attributes of God described by the Vedas?

The universe consists fundamentally of two principles, matter and consciousness, which Sankhya philosophy has long described as **Prakriti** and **Purusha**. Material nature contains innumerable elements, all beginningless and endless. Each possesses its own inherent qualities, properties and modes of action; these constitute its very nature. It is through them that creation remains continuously in existence.

If this were not so, when an easterly or westerly wind blows, would someone have to travel east or west and push it into motion? Or does the wind move of itself according to the laws of pressure? Rain follows the same natural order. It falls when the natural conditions necessary for rainfall are fulfilled. Nature is insentient. It does not know whether drought, scant rainfall or excessive rain will bring loss to one person and benefit to another.

In 1987, for instance, heavy rain and flooding devastated Mithila, while Rajasthan, Gujarat, Odisha and other regions suffered drought. Can such a state of affairs be regarded as the work of an omniscient, compassionate and omnipotent God?

Does water spring from the earth and do streams begin to flow only because God inspires them to do so? Do the moon, the sun and the stars shine solely by His grace? Is it He who makes every flower bloom? Strange superstitious notions of this kind have been fashioned through the ages, and under their cover the cunning have continued to exploit the ignorant.

The human being who acquires knowledge, cultivates purity of conduct and attains a state true to his own nature

makes this life meaningful and becomes worthy of liberation. Such a person has no need of any separately imagined God.

Kabir says in the **Bijak**:

"Bereft of knowledge, the doer wanders in delusion;

Maya has led the whole world astray."

Deceiving others and forcibly taking away another person's wealth or honour are acts of worldly human beings, not of God. To lead ascetics, virtuous and devoted women, those who speak the truth and those who walk the path of truth away from their way and bring about their fall, can these be the acts of a being endowed with wisdom?

Speaking of incarnations, Kabir says:

"The ten incarnations are divine illusion;

do not worship them as the Creator.

Kabir says, listen, O saints:

whatever is born and perishes is other than the Creator."

In other words, the conception of ten, or twenty-four, incarnations belongs to the realm of divine illusion. To worship such imagined incarnations is the act of one who lacks true knowledge. Incarnation and incarnator alike, the avatar and the God who is said to descend as one, are creations of the human mind. For how can the creator of the universe himself be subject to birth and death?

Among the twenty-four incarnations, Shri Rama, Krishna, Mahatma Buddha and others were historical great men; the rest are imaginary. Indeed, **avatara** literally means descending and taking birth, something that properly belongs to a living being engaged in the world of action.

The doctrine of incarnation gives rise to a sense of

inferiority in human beings. Were this not so, why does an incarnate deity not intervene whenever a country or a religion faces a crisis? When those of another faith plundered the temple of Somnath, why were its priests left simply looking on? Why did they not call upon God and save it?

Human beings cannot truly advance until they understand that, upon this earth, human beings themselves possess the greatest power. Ideas of God, gods and goddesses, and divine incarnations arise in that darkened region of the human mind where, conscious of its own weakness, it seeks a momentary refuge.

In truth, when the self develops into the state of a **mahatma**, a great soul, it itself becomes **Paramatma**, the Supreme Self. When a human being conquers lust and anger, attachment and hatred, and other such vices, he begins to discover within himself the forms that have been called God, the Supreme Self, the Divine and Brahman.

The **Shrimad Bhagavata** says:

Daridro yas tv asantuṣṭaḥ, kṛpaṇo yo 'jitendriyaḥ;

guṇeṣv asakta-dhīr īśo, guṇa-saṅgo viparyayaḥ.

(11.19.44)

One whose mind is filled with discontent is truly poor. One who has not mastered the senses is wretched. Truly capable, free and sovereign is the person whose mind is not attached to sensual enjoyment. By contrast, one who remains wholly bound to such pleasures is utterly sinful. ❑

Samskara and the Songs of Samskara

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Samskara is a conception that operates among us in many forms and in many settings. Its influence may be faint in some cases and intense in others. The question worth asking is: why is it faint in one instance and intense in another? For the present, however, I shall not pursue that question, but turn instead to the traditional understanding of **samskara**. The rites of **samskara** were conceived as a means of removing certain impurities acquired in the womb and from the surrounding environment, and of refining both body and mind. Grace and civility are among the highest attainments of humanity, and **samskara** is regarded as a means of cultivating them. In philosophical thought, **samskara** is also the imprint left by experience upon the latent mind. An experience leaves its mark upon the unexpressed depths of the mind and, when the appropriate moment comes, that mark manifests itself. This latent impression is called **vasana** and is understood as a **samskara** carried from one birth to another. The writers of the **Dharmashastras** treated **samskara** as a process concerned with cultivating qualities and removing defects in the physical, mental and intellectual life of human beings.

Ashvalayana describes eleven kinds of samskara in his

Grihyasutra, whereas Yajnavalkya lists twelve. Gautama includes various forms of divine sacrifice among the **samskaras** and takes their number as high as forty-eight. According to the Government of India Census Report of 1901, twelve **samskaras** were then in practice among Hindus. In Mithila, tradition recognises sixteen: **Garbhadhana, Pumsavana, Simantonnayana, Jatakarma, Namakarana, Nishkramana, Annaprashana, Chudakarma, Karnavedha, Upanayana, Vedarambha, Samavartana, Vivaha, Vanaprastha, Sannyasa** and **Antyeshti**. Today, only five are commonly practised: birth, tonsure, **upanayana**, marriage and death rites. Even these, however, are not observed uniformly across all castes. **Upanayana**, for instance, is practised only among a limited number of socially dominant castes. Tonsure too has no single form. If society as a whole is kept in view, only three rites appear to be widespread across it: birth, marriage and death.

Social considerations played an important part in the conception, selection and naming of these **samskaras**. Their prescriptions were clearly intended to regulate life in a particular manner and direct it towards an ideal. They were not merely concerned with purity; they also reflected the perceived need for an ordered way of life. In other words, in the social conditions created by the mingling of Aryans and non-Aryans, **samskara** emerged, in part, from a Brahmanical concern to preserve a distinct identity. The observance of **samskaras** received particular emphasis during the medieval period. This does not mean, of course, that removing faults and cultivating virtues is in itself undesirable. History bears witness that changing material conditions have at different times increased the social value sometimes of daughters and

sometimes of sons.

What is called Maithil culture today: is it, in fact, the culture of Mithila as a whole? To consider this question, we must look at Mithila's history. The land of Mithila was formed from the soil and sand brought down from the Himalayas. This riverine region was inhabited by Kiratas and Kaulhas. During the process of Aryanisation, groups who came from outside established themselves as **dvijas** and acquired authority over the region. Kshatriyas came to control political power, Brahmins social authority, and Vaishyas economic power. The indigenous people, the original inhabitants, were reduced to the status of **antyajas**.

Because the newcomers were relatively few in number, **pratiloma** marriages gained ground, whether for agricultural work or for other social needs. The **Manusmriti** and histories of Mithila discuss such marriages at length. Since the **dvija** population was small, the newcomers also adopted the indigenous deities, festivals, customs and ritual practices of the region. This led to a process of Brahminisation. Social authority lay in Brahmin hands, and their way of life therefore came to be regarded as culture itself. A new cultural order was imposed upon the indigenous majority. There were no modern means of publicity or mass communication, but whatever means of transmission did exist were largely in the hands of the same groups. Since the **dvijas** possessed access to literacy and the means of writing and reading, their culture gradually came to be presented as the culture of Mithila as a whole. Yet the life-patterns, customs and practices of the indigenous people neither could nor did disappear completely. Even today they cling to the soil like **dub**, the hardy grass that holds the earth together. Their cultural inheritance is what we call

folk culture.

Tonsure and **upanayana** are increasingly moving into the category of optional rites. Mithila is still home to many castes, and except among a few of them, the majority do not practise **upanayana**. How, then, can **upanayana** be described as a **samskara** of Mithila as a whole? At most, it may be called a sectional **samskara**. The same applies to tonsure. There is no single accepted form of the rite. Some take the child to a sacred place for the tonsure, while others go to the banks of the Ganga. Some perform it in the village after making a ritual vow, while others do it without songs, music, worship or formal ritual. Some distribute **kheer** and **tikri** within the community, while others arrange a full feast. When all these forms are considered together, the question arises: which of them should be regarded as the representative form of the tonsure rite?

Similar questions arise in relation to marriage. Marriage between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman is common. In some castes, a man marrying for the second time does not marry an unmarried woman, whereas among the majority of castes, marriage between previously married men and women is accepted. An unmarried man may also marry a woman who has been married before. Nor is there uniformity in death rites. Death is regarded as an occasion of mourning, and therefore there is no singing or music. Yet a question remains: why should mourning over death itself be treated as a **samskara**? An untimely death may reasonably be placed in the category of sorrow, but why should death after the completion of a full span of life be regarded in the same way? In nature, we see living things perish of themselves after completing their natural term. Human beings are no

exception. Yet despite all these questions, society has continued to accept birth, marriage and death as practical **samskaras**. Whatever variations may exist here and there, society is like an ocean that ultimately gathers everything into itself.

The importance of rising above the problems of individual life and learning to live for the wider community has always been recognised, and it remains important today. This is the essential spirit of **sannyasa**. The period of **brahmacharya** is devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. The householder's stage is the practical phase of life, in which one earns a livelihood. It creates a new family, and through it society moves forward and grows in prosperity. By the time a person reaches the final stage, **sannyasa**, he has been enriched by both knowledge and action. If such a person then devotes himself to the service of those who lack knowledge and awareness, there is nothing undesirable in that. Indeed, such service is necessary.

Samskara songs are songs sung on the occasions of the various rites. They belong to living folk tradition, and the very soul of folk song resides in them. Remove **samskara** songs from the delightful garden of folk music and that garden would lose its vitality, for nearly all the major characteristics of folk song are present in these songs. With the exception of death rites, every **samskara** is celebrated in an atmosphere of joy. In such moments of festivity, the waves of melody rising from women's voices set the body swaying, create a resonance in the heart and stir a lively excitement in the mind. Singing has long been a natural gift of the men and women of Mithila. At tonsure, **upanayana**, marriage and similar occasions, women sing together in blended voices. This is one

of Mithila's cultural inheritances. Men too sing collectively during festivals and religious observances.

Samskara songs form an integral part of folk song. It is often said that a folk song has no single author; it is a collective creation whose true home is the voice of the people. As a song passes from one voice to another, its form changes. Its **bhas**, or melodic mode, changes as well. The same song may be sung in several forms by changing its **bhas**. For this reason, complete uniformity is rarely found in **samskara** songs.

Another consequence of this fluid oral tradition is the unrestricted use of **bhanita**, the poet's name or signature inserted into a song. Women singing a song may spontaneously add the name of one poet or another as its **bhanita**. A composition by Vidyapati may thus become one attributed to Umapati; at another time, a song associated with Umapati may be attributed to Chanda Jha or Manbodh. Nor does this process stop within the Maithili-speaking region. Tulsidas, Surdas, Mira and other poets from outside Mithila enter the voices of Mithila's mothers and sisters and, in the process, become poets of Mithila and Maithili as well. This is both appropriate and inappropriate. It is appropriate in the sense that their popularity through works such as the **Vinay Patrika**, the **Ramayana** and the **Sursagar** became so widespread that they came to be regarded as one's own. As for words changing and breaking into new forms, that belongs to the borderland between knowledge and ignorance. Language is born among ordinary people. New words come into existence, while established words are altered and may themselves become new words. This is why, in the oral tradition of **samskara** songs, it often becomes difficult to

determine who actually composed a particular song. What remains clear is that these songs bear witness to the refined cultural consciousness of Maithil women.

In Mithila, **samskara** songs have also served as a form of informal education. Formal education was once forbidden to women in Maithil society. Nor were women alone excluded; ordinary people rooted in the soil were excluded as well. It was even said that if they read the **Vedas** or the **Gita**, they would go mad. Yet learned women did exist. **Samskara** songs are connected not only with culture and literature but with society itself. Few other cultural forms reveal the interdependence of culture, literature and society as clearly as these songs do. Collecting and publishing them brings literature preserved in oral tradition into the written record and provides material for literary study and analysis.

In Mithila, a sequence of **samskara** songs traditionally begins with a song to **Gosauni**, the Goddess. This offers an insight into the religious sensibility of Maithil society. Yet it also raises a question: why, on occasions of **samskara**, does this religious feeling find its strongest expression chiefly in songs to **Gosauni**? Clearly, in this context **Gosauni**, the Goddess, holds greater importance than **Gosain**, the male Lord. Songs to God are certainly sung in Mithila, but during **samskara** rites the prominence accorded to the Goddess is not accorded to the male deity. Why, then, has Goddess worship held such a prominent place in Mithila?

It is widely known that Goddess worship is closely connected with Tantric practice. Some historians hold that Tantra arose among non-Sanskritised tribal communities and was later adopted by Brahmanical groups. For a long time,

Tantric practice was regarded as non-Vedic. Gradually, as it was adopted and absorbed, it became part of the **Sanatana** religious tradition. Followers of Vedic religion too came under the influence of Tantric practice and were drawn towards Goddess worship. Beyond this, there was a long-standing debate among scholars as to whether the Shaiva or the Shakta tradition held greater prominence in Mithila. The dispute was eventually resolved through the recognition that the people of Mithila were **Panchadevopasakas**, worshippers of five principal deities. This understanding was a product of the syncretic religious life of earlier times. It also reveals the medieval character of **samskara** songs.

Maithili songs associated with the **samskaras** have a history of their own. According to the history of Maithil song recorded by Lochana in his **Ragatarangini**, the tradition took shape in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Shiv Singh and Vidyapati were contemporaries. Vidyapati's grandfather, Sumati, is described in the Maithili text as an initiator of the Maithili song tradition. In this way, Mithila's indigenous song tradition came to be established. This is the conclusion presented on the basis of historical evidence. Yet the human impulse to sing is bound up with the very development of human life, and from that perspective the tradition may well be far older.

The manner in which a song is sung, what is elsewhere called its **raga**, is known in Mithila as its **bhas**. Mithila's **bhas** has a distinctive character of its own, and **samskara** songs preserve a rich store of these melodic forms. There are, however, some practices that arise from inadequate understanding. The same **samdaun**, for example, may be sung

both on a joyful occasion and at a time of sorrow, even though the subject matter appropriate to the two occasions is different. Similarly, the **kumar** songs sung at a son's wedding differ from the **kumari** songs appropriate to a daughter's wedding, just as **khelauna** and **sohar**, both associated with birth, are distinct forms of song. ❑

Dominant Culture and the Struggle of Marginalised Communities

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It is heartening that **Antika** has begun a live discussion devoted to the struggle for the welfare of neglected sections of society. My thanks and good wishes to Gauriji for this initiative.

Throughout the world, dominant cultures have imposed themselves upon marginalised or neglected communities through force and coercion, and they have continued to do so through the ages. History bears witness to this. More than fourteen thousand wars have already been fought on this earth.

Feudalism, or what may also be called Brahmanism, emerged around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Before that, exploitation existed in the conditions of what may be described as a primitive or forest-based social order. With the rise of feudalism, however, exploitation assumed a different form.

The development of Vedic culture, language and literature was connected with the life of ordinary people.

Different scholars have dated the composition of the Vedas differently and on different grounds, though broadly speaking many have placed them about five thousand years ago. The Vedas are said to contain a hundred thousand **sutras** concerned with action, knowledge and worship. I shall not enter into that here. Time is short, and how much can one say in only ten minutes?

The title of this programme refers to the struggle of the **Pachpaniya**, but it might have been better if the discussion of struggle had drawn a clearer line between the socially advanced and the socially backward sections. The fact that the programme itself is being conducted in Maithili is certainly another step forward for the language. Before anything else, however, we need to distinguish between language and literature. Many people treat language as literature and literature as language, but they are not the same. Literature is a mirror of society, while language is the medium through which people communicate with one another.

In the course of linguistic development, the language of the people acquired a Vedic form. As that language was refined, it developed into Classical Sanskrit. Classical Sanskrit increasingly became the language of a minority, while the majority of the people remained outside it. Yet language is indispensable to human life. Resistance therefore arose among the people against Sanskrit. Classical Sanskrit receded and Pali established itself among the wider population. One thing must also be remembered: the India we see today did not exist in the same form in earlier times. Languages therefore developed in different forms from region to region. There was a difference between the India of 1947 and the India that existed before it, and languages and cultures

likewise differed from one region to another.

When Pali too was progressively refined and began to move away from ordinary people, resistance arose within it as well, and Apabhramsha emerged. Thereafter, other languages continued to develop and change. I shall leave the discussion of language there. During the medieval period, what we call the Bhakti Age or Bhakti Period, there was a powerful linguistic movement. Through Tulsidas came Awadhi, through Surdas came Braj, and through Kabir came Maithili along with other eastern languages. That, however, is not my subject here. What matters at present is that literature not only shows society the road ahead; it also walks beside society and, in difficult times, pushes it forward from behind. The question, therefore, is what kind of literature the society of Mithila has today, and whether that literature is moving with society or leaving society behind.

Not Mithila alone, but the whole country had remained bound for thousands of years in chains of subjection, chains that were only partially broken in 1947. We all know that stories of conflict between gods and demons have been told since the **Satya Yuga**. In the **Treta Yuga** came the battle between Rama and Ravana. Numerous tales and legends show us what kind of fate powerful sections of society created for the powerless. We also know the story of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas in the **Dvapara Yuga**. The problems we see within society today are the very kinds of problems narrated in the Puranas. Let us leave all that aside for the moment. There is little to be gained now by continuing to return to Ekalavya and Dronacharya. Every human being has only one life. We must look at what that life is and how it is actually lived.

The central question is how a relationship can be sustained between Vedic thought and the life of human beings today. The Vedic culture reflected in literature represented the life of the society of its own time. Today we are living in the twenty-first century, an age regarded as scientific. A scientific age demands a practical approach to life. Yet seeds of division are constantly being sown within society. In such circumstances, building a genuinely practical social life is no child's play. An atmosphere has even been created in which people say that the Maithili language will die. How did such an idea arise? How can Maithili, an international language, simply die? Such attitudes arise from families that treat Mithila and Maithili as grazing grounds for their own interests and, in doing so, pollute the social atmosphere.

Before 1912, Bihar and Bengal formed a single province. Vidyapati lived six or seven hundred years ago. Did he belong to everyone, or only to us and not to you? Maithili speakers are often unwilling to acknowledge their own weakness. They do not ask what kind of social consciousness Bengali speakers have developed through their language and what kind exists in Maithili. Bengalis have remained deeply loyal to their language. Even in the most unfamiliar place, if they catch the faintest scent of their own soil, they immediately bring their mother tongue to the fore and begin speaking in Bengali. But how many Maithils are prepared to approach their language and society with that degree of commitment? Let that question remain.

Vedic culture is also regarded as part of Mithila's culture. In linguistic form it is still widely present, but we must look honestly at its condition in practical life. We may advance as far as we like in words, but life and society do not

advance merely through words. The society that has taken shape today has become directionless. Literature is needed to show it a direction. At that point, we must also examine our own literature and ask: whose writers are we? There is a Maithili saying, **Ghuri phiri babhana, tore angana**, meaning that after wandering about, the Brahmin returns to the same courtyard. But let us leave sayings and proverbs aside and speak of actual conditions. Whether we consider language, literature or culture, an enormous distance has opened between dominant society and society standing at the margins. How can a life lived with full hands and a life lived with empty hands flow in the same current, especially in this materialistic age? Even language clearly reflects this divide. Marginalised society has its own speech, while dominant society has another. I shall not now enter into the question of how Indo-European languages arose.

Literature travels with language. Even now, many people confuse language with literature and literature with language. But the real question is this: how closely is the literature being written in Maithili today connected with society? Is it not the case that one may sit twenty storeys up in America, look at and listen to Mithila through a computer, and speak of plucking leafy greens and living in Mithila? I shall not go further into literary questions here. For the present, I shall say only this: we ourselves have to build and sustain our language, our literature and our culture. They will survive through what we ourselves do.

The question of reservation has arisen throughout the country. But what is reservation, and why is it needed? What do we actually see in the reservation provided for women, Harijans and other socially disadvantaged sections? Women

have been given fifty per cent reservation in Panchayat elections. Seats have also been reserved for Harijans and disadvantaged communities. Yet the person who was **mukhiya** five elections ago may effectively remain in control even today. Much the same is true of other forms of reservation.

Legislation permitting inter-caste marriage was passed during the time of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, but what place has such marriage acquired in society? In what forms are incidents of abduction, murder and poisoning increasing? In speech we all say that we should conduct ourselves in accordance with nature and cultivate good thoughts, but what do we see in practice? Why is the proportion of girls in society decreasing day by day? How did the evil of female foeticide spread so widely?

Public institutions are still functioning, to a great extent, along the same lines as they did before Independence. Writers from socially backward communities need to create literature grounded in their own lives. How far can society be taken by song and performance alone? The curriculum of contemporary education must be shaped according to the social environment of the present day. Public institutions too bear responsibility for the directionlessness that has overtaken society. A writer writes by looking at society, not from fantasy. A thousand years ago, Jyotirishwar wrote **Dhurtasamāgama** by observing the society around him. Wherever we may be, we must stand where we are and awaken our own strength. Much can be achieved even by one person. Rajnandan Lal Das, through his own efforts, managed the editing of a journal such as **Karnamrit** for nearly thirty-five or forty years. Even now, Chandramohan Babu, who

lives in Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, has created a platform for Maithil writers. Wherever you are, rise from that very place, stand up, and devote yourself to your mother tongue, your motherland and the protection of your culture.

Our country became independent on 15 August 1947. Do not understand Independence as though it were an amicable exchange between friends. There was a confrontation with British rule, and the British, defeated in that confrontation, left this country. It was not a contest conducted merely through conversation or debate; it was fought through force. Hundreds of thousands of patriots gave their lives. Is not the responsibility for ensuring that their sacrifice was not in vain now ours, yours and mine? We ourselves must safeguard what they won.

We must refine our own language, literature and culture and carry them forward to the next generation. Today we stand seventy-five years after Independence. The democratisation that has taken place in the literatures of other Indian languages has not occurred in Maithili language and literature to the same extent; it is still awaited. The regional divisions that we construct within Maithili are misleading. The eastern part of the Maithili-speaking region is a tract of **dhar-dhur**, a landscape shaped by river channels and riverine terrain, where people face difficulties in transport as well as in earning a livelihood. Within this broader eastern zone, the tract lying to the east of the Kosi and Kamala is comparatively better placed in some respects, although drought occurs there much as elsewhere, the severity of flooding varies, and natural calamities are frequent. Because difficulties of transport caused the eastern region to lag behind the central part, does that mean that its people are not Maithils or do not belong to

Mithila? Such an idea is unjust. Just as the eastern region has been treated as inferior, the western and southern regions have also been treated as inferior.

We are living in the twenty-first century, and therefore we must resist superstition. But how will it be resisted? We have spoken of a struggle between socially advanced and socially backward sections. If that struggle is to be complete, all those concerned will have to rise and stand up. At the same time, an enlightened society can certainly choose to widen its relationships. We must also bring the mistakes of our ancestors before society and work to bridge the divisions they left behind. Such an effort should reach every district and every region.

There is one point I had left aside. The division into eastern, southern, western and central parts, with the central region identified, in Taranand **Viyogi's** view, with the districts of Madhubani and Darbhanga, is itself misleading. Reality is different and more complex. There is a saying: "Climb higher and look around; every household is much the same." Yet when social and political questions arise, **Sotibabu** does not place his trust in **Brahmanbabu**. That is why, in **Sotibabu's** court, responsibility for the treasury was never entrusted to **Brahmanbabu**. Yet the key to the storehouse could indeed be placed in the hands of someone from a socially backward or lower section. That is enough on this point.

Let us move on. Rajput families have remained comparatively behind in Maithili literature, and the same is true of Bhumihar families. There are many reasons for this, but I shall not go into them here. Maithili is a regional language in the sense that it belongs to a particular

geographical region. Marriages in both these communities have often taken place outside that region, and Mithila has consequently become a meeting ground of several languages. In some families, three or four languages may be in use. Maithili naturally faces difficulties in such circumstances.

Today, Maithili speakers from the eastern, western and southern parts are often measured against those of the central region, especially Madhubani and Darbhanga. Those in Madhubani and Darbhanga who regard their own region, or its writers, as representing inherently standard or advanced Maithili are mistaken. They fail to notice that a single village may contain ten, twenty, twenty-five or fifty castes, each with differences in speech and social life. Such differences in lived experience inevitably produce differences in language and literature too, and indeed they already do.

We all tend to regard Vidyapati's writings as works in a standard form of the language. I shall not say much on this, but two points deserve attention. First, go to Bisfi today and listen to the language actually spoken in the village. That remains a living question. Second, compare earlier editions of Vidyapati's works with present-day editions. There is another point as well. Suppose three writers belong to the same caste, one educated in English, another in Sanskrit, and the third in science or a general subject. The differences in their language will be clearly visible. That is enough for now. What we need to ask is what kind of language, literature and culture contemporary society requires.

During marriages and **upanayana** ceremonies in Mithila, a **marwa**, a ritual pavilion, is erected. What does that **marwa** signify? It signifies a particular Vedic conception of

the family. Yet the form of the family itself is changing today, and new social ailments are emerging with those changes. The circumstances of our time demand women's awakening, and education is essential for it. Men too have not fared especially well, but the position of women is still worse. At the same time, the system of education itself is becoming increasingly expensive. If you wish to give your daughter a good education, what happens when the time comes for her marriage? Society seems to say: whatever you spent on her education, spend as much again on her wedding. Such is the shamelessness of our social order in Mithila. I shall say no more on that.

Let me end with this. Maithils now live in every part of the country, in places such as Patna, Delhi, Gujarat, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Madras and Kolkata. Wherever they are, they should contribute in some way to Maithil identity through language, literature and culture. Just as we sometimes imagine that Maithili is dying, we should also recognise that Maithili is no longer confined to the geographical region of Mithila; it has become a language spread across the country. The central question is what form language should take in an independent nation, what form its literature should take, and what changes are required in culture. In the end, the aim is simply this: the society of Mithila too must reshape itself in accordance with the needs of the present age. ❑

International Maithili Conference, 2011: Guwahati

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First of all, I offer my thanks to all those associated with this festival and to the Mithila Cultural Coordination Committee for keeping alive the stream of life that has flowed between Mithila and Kamarupa through the ages. I hope that this living current will continue to flow with the same vitality in the years ahead.

It is difficult to say exactly when the relationship between Kamarupa and Mithila began, but there can be little hesitation in saying that this stream of life has been flowing between them for thousands of years. Kamarupa was once known as Pragjyotisha; perhaps the relationship began even then. I am not a student of history and therefore make no claim to a deep historical study, but there can be no doubt that close ties between the two regions have endured for a very long time. Even as a child, I used to hear elderly people say that such-and-such a person possessed the learning of Kamarupa. For the people of Mithila, Kamarupa and Kamakhya have also been places of pilgrimage from ancient times and will, I believe, remain so. In much the same way, people have travelled to Gangasagar and Dakshineswar in

Bengal, Konark and Jagannath in Odisha, Shvetban Rameshwar and Kanyakumari in Madras, Dwarka in Gujarat, Pushkar in Rajasthan, the Golden Temple in Punjab, Vaishno Devi and Amarnath in Kashmir, Badrinath and Haridwar in Uttarakhand, and Kashi, Vindhyachal, Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh. These journeys took place even in times when there were few means of transport.

Because Mithila and Kamarupa both lie within the great Ganga-Brahmaputra plain, affinities naturally extend from agriculture to many other aspects of life. Kamarupa possesses foothill plains, mountains, plateaux and forests, with numerous streams flowing through them; Bihar too has comparable geographical features. The monsoon rising from the Bay of Bengal waters Kamarupa just as it waters Mithila. Kamarupa, being struck by the monsoon first, receives heavier rainfall, which gradually diminishes as it moves westwards. Yet the two regions are close enough for the difference not to be very great. Being parts of the same Ganga-Brahmaputra basin has given their soil, and even the fragrance of that soil, a certain kinship. The streams descending from the northern hills also share much the same character. Where soil and water are alike, crops tend to resemble one another; where crops are similar, food habits and ways of life develop affinities; and where food habits and social practices are similar, artistic and cultural relationships also emerge. Such connections between Mithila and Kamarupa have existed from ancient times.

There are, of course, similarities as well as differences in agriculture. Differences in the amount of rainfall produce differences in water-dependent crops and fruits. Coconut, areca nut and tea are abundant in Kamarupa but much less so

in Mithila. Mithila, on the other hand, has thousands of varieties of mango alone. Jute and paddy are major crops in Kamarupa, and so they are in Mithila. Just as the development of a new form of indigo brought indigo cultivation to an end, the arrival of polythene has adversely affected jute cultivation.

Mithila's soil is fertile. Its soil, water and clean air have together sustained the growth of agriculture, ways of life, art and culture. The intellectual tradition of Mithila has envisioned not merely individuals of high attainment but also a higher social order and a humane social system. Janakpur, the city of the people; King Janaka of Janakpur; and his daughter Janaki, revered as the Mother of the World, belong to that inheritance. Mithila has produced thinkers, seekers of truth and philosophers of the highest order, glimpses of whose lives and thought remain preserved in history and the Puranas.

Just as the country as a whole remained caught for centuries in the grip of subjugation, Mithila, situated in its north-central region, shared the same fate. Mithila, however, is divided between two countries. The Indian part breathed the air of independence some sixty or sixty-five years ago, while Mithila in Nepal experienced political change more recently. Just as deprivation affects every aspect of life in a poor household, prolonged adversity affected every aspect of life in Mithila. Distortions gradually entered its way of life and hardened into habits, with harmful consequences. Yet, despite all this, it remains the same land of Mithila that has existed through the ages.

The fertility of Mithila has also been accompanied by a steady growth in population. Its population has always been large, remains so today and will remain so in the future. However far Maithils have migrated and however widely they have settled across the world, Mithila itself continues to have

a substantial population. Poverty, too, has remained alongside this condition. Seen from one perspective, Mithila has both a large population and abundant wealth, but the two have not come together in a balanced relationship, and a deep gulf has opened between them. Those who live in the villages have little property, while those who possess much of the property generally do not live in the villages. As a result, a handful of people have gained control over a disproportionate share of the wealth. Migration is one of the clearest manifestations of this imbalance.

Driven by poverty, Maithils have travelled for their livelihood not merely today but for generations, going as far as Nepal, Bengal and Assam. Cutting jute, transplanting paddy and harvesting paddy were among their principal forms of labour. They would spend six months of the year earning away from home. Yet this movement also produced significant gains of another kind. They carried their language, art and culture with them when they travelled and brought other influences back when they returned. In this way, relationships between the regions became steadily deeper. Living together created ties of every kind, and that current continues to flow even today. On this sacred occasion, therefore, I offer countless salutations both to the Coordination Committee and to Vidyapati.

Commercial relations between eastern India and Mithila are also ancient. Trade in cattle, especially cows and buffaloes, has long taken place between the regions. Along with the movement of artists, there has also been a continuing exchange of art. Even today, the languages of eastern India circulate more widely among Mithila's labouring people than they do among its middle and upper social groups.

On this sacred occasion of the Vidyapati festival, it

would be an injustice to Vidyapati to confine him solely to Mithila and the Maithils. It would wound his spirit. He was a figure of his age whose significance reaches far beyond such boundaries. Language and literature have currents of their own, and Vidyapati still stands within one of those great currents. When Vedic language acquired a literary current among the people, a new social formation arose within society. As that development continued and reached the age of Kalidasa, the two came to stand face to face. Yet language is indispensable to human life, and so Pali arose among ordinary people. The current moved forward through Prakrit and Apabhramsha until it reached Avahatta. Vidyapati stands at the threshold of Avahatta with his **Kirtalata**, in which the spirit of ordinary people can still be seen shining through.

Vidyapati was also a profound scholar of Sanskrit, and that learning is visible in his writings. Yet he lived in intimate companionship with Ugna, who would bring him Ganga water. One would lose himself in grinding **bhang**, while the other delighted in drinking it. With such intimacy between them, it was only natural that Vidyapati would even quarrel with his wife for Ugna's sake and let a stream of selfless affection flow towards him.

Let me end with a wish. Just as Mithila and Kamarupa have remained close to each other from ancient times, may they continue to move forward together in the future. May festivals such as this grow ever larger and continue to be celebrated with still greater warmth and participation.

Victory to Maithili! Victory to Mithila! Victory to Kamarupa! Victory to India! Victory to Humanity! ❑

On the 100th Story Gathering of *Sagar Rati Deep Jaray*

(Let the Lamp Burn All Night)

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Emergence and dissolution are eternal truths, and so are life and all its activities. In the literary firmament of Maithili, the eighth decade of the twentieth century brought together an unusually vigorous group of writers, like a sky washed clear after the rains, free of mist, frost and dust. Harimohan Babu (Harimohan Jha), Tantar Babu (Tantranath Jha), Madhupji (Kashikant Mishra 'Madhup'), Kiranji (Kanchinath Kiran), Manipadmaji (Braj Kishore Varma 'Manipadma'), Shekharji (Sudhanshu Shekhar Chaudhary), Yogababu (Yoganand Jha), Raghavacharyaji (Bodh Narayan Jha), Baherji (Radhakrishna Jha 'Baher') and Radhakrishna Chaudhary were writers capable of looking towards every horizon of the Maithili literary world. Harimohan Babu was a philosopher, yet Maithili literature scarcely allowed him to be seen beyond humour. The twenty-first century demands that his work be reassessed against Mithila's traditions of thought and spiritual philosophy. The fundamental character of Radhakrishna Chaudhary's historical writing likewise deserves reconsideration. His history offers readers a new way of thinking and a new perspective, and he should be read from

that perspective. Some books may, of course, have escaped my notice, but history remains history. Where historical writing has not yet moved far beyond kings and royal houses, it would not be proper to claim completeness for it.

It is unfortunate that our history has not yet looked closely enough at the social fabric. Mithila's food habits and forms of domestic life still preserve much of their old character. What is needed is the eye to see them. If Madhupji could see **poro saag**, could he not also see the people who ate that humble green? The question is intriguing. Kiranji, for his part, was truly a ray of Maithili. He travelled on a bicycle with wooden pedals and a folded **shatranji** mat laid across it. His nature shone like the autumn moon. His hospitality was simple, often no more than a cup of tea. A question inevitably arises: why do we no longer see such a fellowship of writers today? There was an awakening in the literary world then, and within society there was a curiosity, a growing sense that literature belonged to ordinary people too.

Kiranji used to say quite plainly: write as you speak, and make the society you actually see the subject of your writing. That is literature. Rahul Sankrityayan held a similar view. His principle, too, was that if you can make another person understand what you mean and can properly understand what another person means, that is the grammar of the language. Words are part of the current of language, but the current of language is far greater than its individual words. How one language enters another is a different process altogether. Manipadmaji truly understood the inner substance of literature. His writing grew from his own experience of life and from the realities of the eastern part of Darbhanga district. He was a writer with a distinctive stamp. He was not merely a

one-sided poet; he also understood the spirit of folk narrative. Writers such as these made that decade fertile. By contrast, the following decade grew increasingly barren. Yet the literary current continued to flow. That earlier period also brought to light a number of writers who had remained lost or forgotten in villages. Many, however, remain undiscovered even now, while some have disappeared altogether.

The idea of organising the **Sagar Rati Deep Jaray** story gathering arose among writers assembled at Lohna (Dharmapur) on the occasion of Kiranji's birth anniversary. The credit for turning that idea into reality, however, belongs to Prabhas Kumar Chaudhary. Prabhasji had the opportunity to put into practice the searching and probing literary spirit represented by Kiranji. His life was distinctive, his thinking distinctive, his creative work distinctive, and so was his way of seeing. An inexhaustible curiosity and sensitivity ran through his entire being, and his living works continue to testify to it.

The writers agreed that, just as Punjabi literature had an all-night story gathering called **Deeva Jale Saari Raat** (**Let the Lamp Burn All Night**), Maithili too should have one of its own. With fresh enthusiasm and fresh curiosity, Prabhas Bhai took the first step. His desire was that the literary current should move together with society. Sadly, only a few years later, he passed away.

The first story gathering was held in Muzaffarpur, where Prabhasji was then employed. Renuji presided over it. He too looked at society with an impartial eye. From that day to the present, the story gathering has remained both a heritage and a precious asset of Maithili literature. The short

story is one of literature's principal genres and may, in that sense, even be called one of its first-born forms. The first gathering took place in January 1990. Among those who read stories were Rameshji with **Thak** (**Weariness**); Srinivasji (Shiv Shankar Srinivas) with **Vasatme Bahait Lok** (**People Drifting in the Wind**); Vibhuti Anandji with **Anyapurush** (**The Other Man**); Ashokji with **Pishach** (**The Demon**); Siyaram Sarasji with **Ohi Sanjhak Nam** (**In the Name of That Evening**); and Prabhasji with **Khooni** (**The Killer**). Ravindra Chaudharyji also read a story. Dr Nand Kishore, a respected teacher at L. S. College, read a story as well. It was unfortunate, however, that although he was a Maithili speaker, he chose to read in Hindi. He was also a critic. Among the critics present, along with the story writers, were Ramanand Jha 'Raman', Bhim Bhai (Bhimnath Jha), Mohan Bharadwaj and Jeevkant. I do not now recall whether Jeevkant also read a story. There were other critics and, naturally, a number of listeners as well.

Book releases began with the third story gathering and grew steadily thereafter. At the Darbhanga gathering, the number reached an extraordinary height, with thirty-five or forty books released together. That remained the record until the Nirmali gathering, where forty-five to fifty books were released. The gatherings brought new momentum to the stream of Maithili short fiction. New writers continued to enter, and the gatherings kept moving forward. Yet there was no uniformity in their organisation. At some venues, dawn would arrive and stories would still remain unread; elsewhere, by midnight the organisers would already begin packing away the tea and refreshments. Be that as it may, a literary gathering is a platform for writers, and everyone has the right

to place his thoughts before it. If all of us desire the development of Mithila, why should differences of opinion become barriers? Alongside a story gathering, there is also a need for a forum devoted to thinking about the short story itself. Who will determine the standards of writing and the criteria of criticism? The outlook of a past age cannot adequately evaluate the literature of the present. Every age creates its own literary criteria. It is therefore the historical responsibility of contemporary writers and critics to evaluate the writing of their own time. Contemporary writers whose work possesses merit should also receive an appropriate place in educational syllabi.

Across the world, major educational institutions are sustained through public cooperation. Why should that not be possible here? We have a university and a radio station. Helping such institutions grow properly is a responsibility shared by us all. If a university looks entirely towards the government, while misappropriation there flows like a flood, how much can reasonably be expected from it? It is not that Mithila lacks people with wealth and a love of education. The many books published under Gajendraji's (Gajendra Thakur's) editorship with the support of Nagendraji (Nagendra Jha of Shruti Prakashan) are themselves an example. Nor can Gajendraji's personal contribution be forgotten. He exerted himself to the utmost in connection with the Tagore Award. When the time came for the journey to Cochin, he personally drove us to Patna Airport, attended to all the arrangements, and saw us off together with Durganand Mandal. His intention has always been clear: the works of writers who are economically weak should be published. He has acted upon that conviction and continues to do so.

Let me conclude this part with Om Babu (Om Prakash Jha), who came to the Nirmali gathering carrying his collection of **ghazals** for release. I already knew a little about him, but seeing him in person left a strong impression upon me. The desire to do something was clearly alive within him. The rest of that story can wait; for the moment, let us leave it here. Just as Shravan Kumar set out carrying his blind parents upon his shoulders to take them on a pilgrimage to the four sacred shrines, I too bring these few words to a close with hope in my heart. Thank you. Victory to Maithili!

A Word of Good Wishes

No president or other office-bearer has been elected today. That is a good thing. So how am I to address a President? Let me simply say: learned friends. Today we are celebrating the hundredth programme as a festival. Whenever those who take responsibility for a programme, whether literary or political, begin to feel that the programme is their own, then even if some shortcomings remain, they do not dwell upon them. Instead, they ask how the programme can be made as successful and worthwhile as possible. Today's programme is clear evidence of that spirit. Everyone present has shown the same desire: that the programme should succeed.

Many distinguished scholars who have worked in the literary field are present here. If you wish to understand the expressive strength of Maithili as a language, pick up any English dictionary. Where English may have one word, Maithili may offer several words carrying the same or closely related meaning. Such is the richness of this people's language. It has grown from the soil itself, and it will continue

to change with the times and move forward. The birth and development of a language can never be permanently arrested.

The language, then, is not weak. It is true, however, that our literary production remains comparatively limited and that all genres have not received equal attention. Another weakness is that at times we travel farther into the past than is necessary. The past is history, the Puranas and tradition; we must learn from it. But if we turn that past itself into our present and our future, the movement of literature will be obstructed.

In today's programme, I heard Shivkumar Babu remark that "some people form groups..." But that need not be our way. Today we have all come together to think about one common concern, the welfare of Maithili. If we continue to move forward in the same spirit of unity, development will follow. Development is a process of time. It may move slowly or rapidly, but it cannot be stopped. What we need are more and more literary programmes where we can gather and continue exchanging ideas. You want the welfare of Maithili, and so do I. We may differ in our ideas, but not in our goal.

History itself shows us that differences of thought are nothing new. Even what we call Vedic or scriptural thought developed in different directions. On the question of **Brahman**, some accepted **Advaita**, others **Dvaita**, still others **Dvaitadvaita** or **Vishishtadvaita**. Intellectual life has always produced different schools and positions. Each has its own point of departure. But Maithili is our language and its literature is ours. The fundamental questions are: whose is it, and for whom is it? Keeping these questions before us, we must help give Maithili its direction.

The progress of Maithili does not mean merely the

progress of a language or a body of literature. It means the progress of Mithila's society, your progress and mine, the progress of our society's consciousness, self-confidence, thought and folk life. The farther Maithili advances, the farther the mind, intellect and cultural consciousness of Mithila will advance with it. That larger welfare lies within Maithili itself. We must keep this in view and ensure that programmes of this kind continue without interruption.

I would also urge Dilipji to work towards more frequent programmes. Let him issue a general invitation whenever he organises a programme; let me do the same whenever I organise one. Kamal Babu and others are already holding programmes. Narayan Babu, too, is a very active person and has organised many events. We should all adopt the same broad outlook: every such programme belongs to everyone. Let us sit together. Someone may attend and someone else may not. There can be many reasons for absence, many kinds of difficulty. We should not immediately conclude, "So-and-so is offended, and that is why he did not come." That is the wrong way to think.

Let us remain united. Just as we have raised the banner of Maithili language and literature and celebrated this hundredth programme today, let us raise it again for the programme after the hundredth and for the many programmes that will follow. Let us remain equally active so that such programmes may continue. I am deeply pleased that learned people have gathered here to make today's hundredth celebration a success. My wish is that our collective journey should continue without interruption. With that hope, I bring my remarks to a close. ❑

Web Programme, 29 July 2020

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Some twenty or twenty-five days ago, Kamlesh Babu telephoned me. He told me that an old friend from the days when I lived in Calcutta, around 1980–85, was now living in Bombay and had started a programme in which an hour was allotted for a talk. Kamlesh Babu has always devoted himself, to the best of his ability, to the cause of Mithila and Maithili. So if he asked for one hour, why only an hour? I could gladly give him several. I asked whether any particular subject had been fixed for the hour-long talk. By coincidence, I happened to speak with Rajkumar Babu. In the course of our conversation, I sensed in him a deep desire to serve his motherland. The subject itself did not become entirely clear, but one thing certainly made me happy: circumstances had once compelled Maithils to leave Mithila and work elsewhere; if today they feel a desire to serve their motherland, that is a matter of great joy. Our elders used to say that if someone who has been lost all day returns home by evening, he is no longer to be counted among the lost.

Friends, let us now come to the programme itself.

Respected scholars and lovers of Mithila and Maithili, it gives me immense pleasure that we have all come together for this literary discussion organised by the Mithila News Live channel. My thanks to Rajkumar Jha, journalist Krishna

Kumar and Kamlesh Babu. Since I have been given an opportunity to speak, I shall place before you a few thoughts under the broad theme of "Life in Mithila". The subject is vast in itself. If we begin following every branch of the central question, the discussion will travel very far. I shall therefore confine myself to a few particular points: the geographical features of Mithila, its economic condition, its social structure and its philosophical thought.

Let us begin with Mithila's geography, with its soil and the virtues and limitations of that soil, and then turn to the life sustained by its waters. Geographically, we Maithils live within the Ganga-Brahmaputra plain. Our northern boundary is covered by a mountain range stretching roughly three thousand kilometres from east to west. Nepal lies in between as a separate country. Yet no passport is required for ordinary movement between the two countries, nor is there any obstacle to the circulation of Indian currency. The people living on both sides of the border have maintained kinship and matrimonial ties from ancient times, and these continue even today. Udit Narayan remains a prominent singer in the film industry. His home lies on the Nepal side of the border, while his maternal home is in Supaul district in Bihar, where he was also born. Similarly, Dhirendra 'Premarshi', who works with Kantipur FM, is both a singer and a lyricist. People from our side have fields in Nepal, and people from Nepal have fields on our side. The Koirala family of Biratnagar, from which prime ministers of Nepal have come, also has such ties. Phanishwar Nath 'Renu', a native of Araria district in the Maithili-speaking region, wrote the celebrated Hindi novel **Maila Anchal**, and Raj Kapoor's film **Teesri Kasam** was based on a story by Renuji. If I were to begin naming all the

lovers of literature produced by Mithila, an entire hour would be spent on names alone. So let me leave that subject here. Nor are the sages and seers whom we hear of in legends merely figures of stories. Their lives also point towards ways of making human life better. I shall return to this when I speak of Mithila's philosophical tradition.

Situated in the Ganga-Brahmaputra plain, Mithila is adorned with soils of a hundred kinds. Some are extraordinarily fertile and valuable, while others are as barren as charcoal dust. In some fields, the seed scarcely touches the earth before growth seems to flare up like fire. Elsewhere there is barren, saline and sterile land where, instead of sugarcane or grain, hardly anything but **kush** grass grows. Yet even **kush** has its own value. From serving as a ritual seat to its use in rites for ancestors and in the worship of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, it retains an important place.

Mithila's land is closely connected with the Himalayas to the north. The mountains send down fertile soil which, carried by floods in the form of silt, spreads across our fields and replenishes their fertility. At the same time, clouds rising from the Bay of Bengal form the monsoon. The movement of the sun plays a central role in the seasonal cycle. When the sun moves northwards and reaches the Tropic of Cancer at about twenty-three and a half degrees latitude, we experience the intense heat of **Baisakh** and **Jeth**. When the sun moves southwards and reaches the Tropic of Capricorn around 22 December, the cold season sets in.

From the Parman River in Araria district in the east to the Gandak in Motihari, East Champaran, more than fifty rivers and smaller channels enter Mithila from the north and

flow towards the Ganga. Broadly, these waterways may be divided into three types: those that flow throughout the year, those that run for roughly six months, and those that flow only during the rainy season. If the rains are good, the seasonal streams flow well; if there is drought, they remain dry. Even the perennial rivers are of two kinds: those that flow quietly and steadily, and those that are fierce, restless and destructive. The Kosi and Kamala belong to the latter category, while the Bagmati is comparatively calm and has flowed along much the same course for many years. C. M. College in Darbhanga stands on one bank of the Bagmati, with its hostel on the other. A boat secured by a rope carries people from one side to the other. Had the college and hostel stood on the banks of the Kamala or the Kosi, they could hardly have retained the form they have today.

Mithila has suffered for generations from excessive water, floods and drought. In an effort to protect the region from these recurring disasters, a movement under the leadership of Bhogendraji and the Communist Party began and rapidly gathered strength. Thousands of activists went to prison, endured beatings and saw their families suffer. Their demand was that canals be built from the Kosi so that controlled water could provide proper irrigation, and that dams be constructed at Noonther-Shishapani and Barahkshetra to generate hydroelectric power, thereby creating favourable conditions for Mithila to develop industry as well. What the people ultimately received from that mass movement of seventy or eighty years ago is before us all. Whatever was gained belongs to the past. Today, in July 2020, in the twentieth year of the twenty-first century, when we consider ourselves intellectually equipped in every respect,

it is for us to think about what life in Mithila actually is.

Let us now turn to Mithila's economic condition. Much remains unsaid even about its geography, but everything cannot be covered within a fixed time. Economically, life in Mithila has traditionally been based on agriculture. The situation appears to have changed somewhat today, yet the confidence of our ancestors in farming was so deep that the saying "**Uttam kheti**", farming is the best occupation, still lives on people's lips. Agriculture was regarded as the highest means of livelihood.

The basic necessities of life were traditionally provided through farming. We should therefore consider the problems involving land, cultivation and cultivators. Let us begin with the condition of the land itself. Broadly speaking, the **zamindari** system had prevailed here from around the eleventh century. There is no time to discuss the whole system in detail, so I shall confine myself to its broad features. A village may be inhabited by many families, yet not all those who live there possess rights over the fields that constitute the village's principal productive wealth. A person may have a house and therefore call the village his own, but the wealth-producing land of that village may not belong to him. If even the government lacks the capacity to provide five **katthas** of land to every family, what can ordinary people do? Most are already exhausted simply trying to secure vegetables for the day's meal.

The movement for national independence, directed against British rule, advanced another step by around 1935–36. At the Lucknow session, Gandhi's candidate Sitaramayya had lost the election and Subhas Babu had won. In other

words, progressive thinking gained ascendancy over conservative leadership. The movement concerning **bakasht** land was also linked with this wider struggle, and agrarian agitation began. It later expanded through struggles over **belagan**, **sikmi** and sharecropping, eventually reaching the stage of land-ceiling legislation, under which one family could not retain more than twenty **bighas** of irrigated land or thirty **bighas** of unirrigated land. Yet the actual condition of village land even today is before us all and deserves serious thought.

As we move from the past towards the present, what do we see? There was a time in Mithila when giving or taking dowry in the marriage of a son or daughter was regarded as sinful. Today it has virtually become a social virtue and moves through society with a smile. A father will shamelessly boast, "We received eleven lakh. The boy is worth a crore." Such, apparently, is the warmth of love among Maithils: principles are pushed onto the back shelf while fresh curd is set in the earthen pot.

Friends, my thoughts have moved somewhat away from the subject. We began with land. After Independence, Vinoba Bhave launched the **Bhoodan** movement, and landlords across the country donated land. What has become of that donated land today? Anyone living in Bombay or Delhi who has had to buy even five yards of land to build a home will understand the question.

There is much more to say about economic conditions, including the recurring devastation caused by flood and drought. Both flood and drought occur broadly at three levels: mild; partial or moderate, affecting roughly half; and total.

Each level brings its own degree of damage. Alongside flood and drought come riverbank erosion and the destruction of entire villages. Some of the finest and most fertile land has been buried under sand and rendered almost lifeless. Be that as it may, even if the strength has drained from our hands and feet, life still remains in the throat. We can at least continue to think about how Mithila may move forward.

In the medieval period, around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Tulsidas in the **Vinay Patrika** presented a picture of his society: the farmer had no farming, the beggar received no alms, the trader had no trade, and the servant had no employment. People were left asking, "Where shall we go, and what shall we do?" This was a picture of society five or six hundred years ago, in the period of Muslim rule. Today, however, we are citizens of an independent country and therefore possess the right to think independently about our own condition.

A new problem has now assumed a severe form in village after village. Embankments and roads have been built without sufficient foresight, obstructing the natural drainage of water. This is not the problem of one village or one district; the same condition has spread across Mithila. Villagers themselves see the problem and suffer its consequences. Mithila is already criss-crossed by rivers and channels, and nearly a third of its land consists of low-lying **chaur** and **chanchar** tracts whose harvest can never be relied upon.

Let us now turn to the social condition. Human development has always produced distinctions between those who move ahead and those who are left behind, but rather than entering that entire question, I shall concentrate on two

aspects: the caste order within villages and the religious order.

The innumerable castes may, very broadly, be grouped into three categories. The first consists of castes that are relatively prosperous in educational and economic terms. This does not mean that there are no internal differences within them; many members of these groups remain educationally and economically disadvantaged. The second category contains a large number of castes that are not regarded as untouchable but remain backward in their standard of life. The third consists of those communities that have been treated as untouchable. Poverty has damaged their lives so deeply that even seventy or seventy-two years after Independence, the lamp of schooling has still not reached many of their settlements. Their economic condition remains much the same.

Friends, our time is limited and there is much to say. Let us therefore proceed by looking at three points:

1. the **mainjani** system, the customary system by which caste communities regulate their affairs;

2. religious organisation and religious relations between one caste and another;

3. economic and social relations between one caste and another.

The **mainjani** system can be viewed in two ways: first from the standpoint of ideas and ethics, and second as an operating system of social organisation. Without some recognised order, society may lapse into anarchy. Yet when the **mainjani** system becomes a form of caste-based rule, it also gives birth to many social maladies.

The second question concerns religion. Certain gods and goddesses are widely accepted under the larger identity of Hinduism, but beyond them individual castes also have their own deities. Members of other castes may recognise them only partially, may not recognise them at all, or may even oppose them. The division runs so deep that even offerings and **prasad** placed before the deities are not always free from distinctions of touchability and untouchability.

Let us now consider economic relations between one caste and another. Villages differ not only in their caste composition but also in their acreage and patterns of landownership, so the same arrangement has never prevailed everywhere. In grain transactions, a common practice was **sawai** interest: for every one **maund** borrowed, one and a quarter maunds had to be returned. In some villages the rate was **derhiya**, one and a half. In money-lending too, rates varied by village and caste, ranging from two paise to four annas, or as much as a quarter of a rupee. Many other disparities existed from one village to another, but I shall leave them aside. Let us now turn to philosophy.

The basic meaning of philosophy is to see. The world to be seen is immense, and it contains innumerable things, so it is impossible to look deeply into everything here. Let me put the matter briefly. Mithila's philosophical temperament is one that keeps extracting the essence of things, from the material to the realm of thought. Consider the leaf of **tilkor**. It is hardly counted among ordinary greens, and its fruit is bitter, even though parrots may eagerly peck at it when ripe. Yet Mithila has transformed even this into an arrangement of food worthy of a high place. Such refinement did not happen without a way of thinking behind it. Ayachi Mishra, sustained

by no more than a **kattha** of land, spent his entire life giving knowledge freely. Was that an advanced vision, something extraordinary, or some kind of blessing? Let us stop here today. If time permits on another occasion, we shall discuss these questions to our heart's content.

A final word about my own service to literature. Service itself takes many forms: social service, literary service and many others. I began writing after the twentieth century had passed. The first instalment of my books was published in 2009 with the help of Gajendraji, Nagendra Babu and Nutan Jha. Writers themselves know what becomes of books after publication. The day before yesterday I completed a novel, **Suchita**. By now I have written about seven hundred stories, besides novels, poetry and songs, plays and one-act plays. **Namaskar**! ❑

Brother Rajnandan Lal Das: A Life Journey

☰

Brother Rajnandan Lal Das was born on 5 January 1934 in the village of Gonaun in Darbhanga district, into the family of the late Manilal Das. His mother was the late Vidya Devi. One might equally say that Rajnandanji was born in the year of the great earthquake.

To know Rajnandanji without knowing Gonaun would leave our understanding incomplete. For the younger generation wishing to know more about him, I would therefore first draw attention to the geographical setting of Darbhanga district. Two things should be kept in mind at the outset. First, the Darbhanga district that existed before 1972 was subsequently divided into Samastipur, Madhubani and Darbhanga districts. Second, there is a marked difference between the form of villages before 1960 and what they became after 1960.

Numerous rivers flow through the wider Darbhanga region. Madhubani, now a separate district, alone has more than two dozen rivers, large and small. From Sitamarhi, formerly part of Muzaffarpur district, westwards to East Champaran, also known as Motihari, rivers descending from

the hills of Nepal wind their way through this wider region. We also regard the Maithili-speaking area as extending as far as Motihari.

A great distance opened between the village before 1960 and the village that emerged afterwards. When embankments and canals were built along the Kosi and Kamala after 1960, the very face of the villages began to deteriorate and their form changed. The land we inhabit forms part of the Ganga-Brahmaputra plain and slopes from north to south. Before 1960, Gonaun, like many other villages, was a beautiful place, rich in orchards, trees, rivers and streams. Floods certainly came, but their duration was generally no more than two and a half days. However severe the flood, after about two and a half days the water would begin to recede, thereby limiting the damage.

Poverty has long been part of life here, but population growth too has remained strong. Because of poverty, people from this wider region, extending as far as Chhapra and Siwan, travelled for work to Nepal, Assam and Bengal in earlier times and continue to do so even today.

After passing the matriculation examination, Rajnandan Lal Das left his village for Calcutta in 1949. The Calcutta of those days is today's Kolkata. He completed an M.A. in Political Science from the University of Calcutta in 1960 and later worked for twenty-seven years in marketing with private companies.

From his college days onwards, Rajnandan Lal Das remained continuously involved with social and literary organisations. Even earlier, during his high-school years, he had come under the influence of socialist leaders such as

Jayaprakash Babu and Suraj Babu and had begun working as a supporter of the Socialist Party. Jayaprakash Babu's defeat in the 1952 election made a deep impression upon him.

During his years in Calcutta, he was influenced by the Communist Party of India and remained a red-card-holding member until 1967. After completing his M.A., Rajnandanji received training in Sales Management and Marketing Research. His subsequent employment with several companies took him to many parts of India as well as Nepal.

Calcutta is a metropolis where people from countries across the world and speakers of many languages have long met. It is also a major centre of literature and culture. An institution such as Visva-Bharati was founded by Rabindranath Tagore, a great thinker and ascetic spirit. A distinguished Hindi critic and novelist such as Dr Hazari Prasad Dwivedi also lived and created in Bengal. Many eminent thinkers and literary figures from Mithila pursued their work on the soil of Bengal, and Maithili language and literature benefited greatly from their efforts. In 1919, postgraduate teaching in Maithili language and literature began at the University of Calcutta, the first such programme in the world.

For a man so devoted to learning, Calcutta also brought Rajnandan Lal Das into the company of many people deeply attached to their mother tongue. He served as a trusted right-hand man to Babusaheb Chaudhary and Satyanarayan Das. During his student years he was profoundly influenced by a celebrated line of Kaviwar Sitaram Jha (1891–1965): "When an educated person does not speak his own mother tongue, Maithili, I feel like taking hold of both his ears and twisting

them." Under such influences, the flower of love for his mother tongue gradually blossomed in Rajnandanji's heart.

From the very beginning of his working life, whenever his employment took him outside the region, he would finish his professional duties and then search for people from his own land. From Manipur to Kashmir, he would invariably find someone connected with his village, his home region or his own speech. The dialect might differ, but somewhere he would still encounter a recognisably Maithil way of life. His attachment to Mithila and to Maithili language and literature steadily deepened.

Through his contact with Pandit Devanarayan Jha and Comrade Pitambar Pathak, Rajnandan Lal Das became fully active in the Mithila Cultural Conference in 1958. His political awareness, however, had begun much earlier. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, when he was a Class V pupil at Pandaul Middle School, he had already begun participating as a young freedom activist.

From his student years, Rajnandan Lal Das was strongly influenced by different political currents. During his stay in Calcutta, left-wing politics drew him into the Communist Party of India, and he began taking an active part in its various activities. Yet alongside this political engagement, he also lived a peaceful family life. The suffering and struggles endured by earlier generations became a source of renewed strength for him.

Always committed to the advancement of Mithila and Maithili, Rajnandan Lal Das first extended substantial support to the publication of the Maithili journal **Mithila Darshan**. The journal was owned and edited by the late Prabodh

Narayan Singh (1924–2005). Later, Mithila Darshan Private Limited was established, with the late Prabodh Narayan Singh as Chairman, Udit Narayan Jha as Managing Director and Rajnandan Lal Das as Company Secretary. Internal disputes, however, eventually caused the journal to close.

Deeply hurt by disputes within the organisation, Rajnandanji helped establish a new body in 1966, the All India Maithil Sangh, with Mahavir Jha as president and Rajnandan Lal Das as secretary. His love for his language and literature continued to flow with undiminished force. On the occasion of Diwali in 1967, he brought out the inaugural issue of the spirited journal **Aakhar**. After a few issues, however, internal disputes caused this journal too to close.

The closure of the journal left his language-loving mind restless. Meanwhile, a social and literary organisation called Karna Goshthi had been founded in 1963. From the time of its establishment, Rajnandan Lal Das actively opposed it, believing that it would encourage a caste-centred mentality. Its first commemorative volume appeared in 1974, in which Rajnandan Lal Das contributed a forceful essay on the marital problems of the Karna-Kayastha community. Ideological differences continued. Some years later he became associated with Karna Goshthi, and in 1981 the journal **Karnamrit** was launched, with Arjun Lal Karan as Chief Editor and Rajnandan Lal Das as Associate Editor.

His work in marketing took Rajnandan Lal Das to many corners of India and Nepal, and these journeys proved extremely useful in expanding the reach of **Karnamrit**. The journal acquired more than three hundred life subscribers, which also gave it a comparatively sound financial base.

Mithila and Maithili have repeatedly suffered from one particular misfortune: for want of money, many fine works and many valuable journals have died before their time.

Alongside the journal, Rajnandan Lal Das also kept literary awakening in view and helped publish numerous books in different genres, including novels, short stories, poetry, drama, folk ballads, memoirs and criticism. Among the important publications were **Ardhanarishwar** (1981), **Sahityaratnakar Munshi Raghunandan Das: Vyaktitva O Krititva** (1983), **Nagabhumi** (1985), **Tesar Kaniya** (1986), **Maithilik Dadhichi Babu Bhola Lal Das** (1991), **Anang Kusuma** (1999), **Natya-rup Footpath** (2001), **Uttar Janapad** (2003), **Adim Gulam** and **Kanaki** (2003), **Manikan** (2003), **Hunkas Bhet Bhel Chhal** (2004), **Prapanika** (2005), **Bharatik Biladi** (2005), **Maithili Lok Gathak Itihas** (2005), **Jijivisha** (2005), **Agni Shikha** (2005), **Chitra-Vichitra** (2005), **Khohak Anhar** (2005), and a selection of stories by Manipadma (Braj Kishore Varma) (2005). To the very end of his life, Rajnandan Lal Das remained devoted to language and literature.

Rajnandan Bhai possessed a remarkable memory. In the course of speaking, he could suddenly utter an aphoristic phrase that left a powerful impression upon the listener. His speech was naturally enlivened by idioms, proverbs and the language of the village, which made him all the more engaging. Whatever circumstances confronted him, he never lost his judgement or acted without thought. His commitment to society and literature ran so deep that neither the feeling nor the thought behind that commitment ever left his mind.

Rajnandan Lal Das spent much of his life outside

Mithila, yet the service he rendered to Maithili while living in Calcutta can never be forgotten. He possessed a profound love of language and literature and a deep fund of experience of life and the world. His years in Calcutta helped shape his language, style and intellectual outlook. Nor was he merely fond of making plans. He remained equally concerned with how those plans could be brought down to earth and put into practice. He had particular experience in carrying out organisational responsibilities even with limited resources.

It was largely through Rajnandan Lal Dasji's active participation that the Maithili Sangram Samiti was organised in 1967. Udit Narayan Jha became its president and Rajnandan Lal Das its secretary. In its campaign for official recognition of Maithili and other related demands, the Samiti organised protests before ministers of both the Union and Bihar governments and submitted memoranda to them on several occasions.

From 1981, when **Karnamrit** began publication, until the end of his life, Rajnandan Lal Das continued to fulfil his human responsibilities. Alongside the journal, he gave substantial support to the creation of the Yogendra Memorial Scholarship Fund for meritorious students from poor families, the Shrimati Sitavati Memorial Maithili Promotion Fund for gifted creative writing in Maithili, and the Shrimati Rasodevi Memorial Art Promotion Fund for the encouragement of excellence in the arts.

From 1985 onwards, Rajnandan Bhai expanded the Sharadiya issue of **Karnamrit** and began bringing out special issues devoted to major writers and cultural figures. These included the Radhakrishna Chaudhary Memorial Issue (1986),

Manipadma Tribute Issue (1986), Kiran Memorial Issue (1989), Mithila Vibhuti Issue (1992), Jagdeep Narayan Chaudhary 'Deepak' Memorial Issue (1993), Shrikant Mandal Memorial Issue (1994), R. C. Prasad Singh Memorial Issue (1997), Prabhas Kumar Chaudhary Memorial Issue (1998), Vaidyanath Mishra 'Yatri' Memorial Issue (1999), Manipadma Memorial Issue (2000) and Mahakavi Lal Das Memorial Issue (2001), besides many other special issues that he continued to bring out.

With reverence for Brother Rajnandan Lal Dasji's dedication, courage, fearlessness and warmth of character, I can only hope that **Karnamrit** will continue to find editors of the same calibre, editors equally devoted to its purpose. ❑

Interview with Gajendra Thakur, Editor of *Videha e-Journal*

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Gajendra Thakur: Many congratulations on receiving the Videha Samman.

J. P. Mandal: My thanks to the **Videha** family for seeking out writers who had been lost or overlooked.

Gajendra Thakur: In your view, what is the purpose of literature?

J. P. Mandal: Most scholars regard literature as the mirror of society. But the mirror in which we ordinarily look shows only the outward surface of an object. It cannot reveal the mind, intellect, judgement or soul within the human body. Literature, being created by human beings, brings the outer and the inner together and shows us both. Literature is a philosophy of life that links the past with the future. Its purpose is therefore a great one: to guide human beings towards living with love, person with person and individual with society. That guidance is the purpose of literature.

Gajendra Thakur: How do history and culture, particularly those of Mithila, find expression in your literature?

J. P. Mandal: Mithila has always been predominantly agricultural. History speaks of a hunting age and a forest-dwelling stage before the agricultural age. These were not merely historical categories; they were actual forms of human life. Even though Janaka was a king, he himself ploughed the land, which demonstrates the importance attached to agriculture. From the very beginning, Mithila has faced repeated incursions by outside cultures. As a result, its own culture has been bent and broken and has undergone distortions. Yet, despite being wounded and diminished, it has remained alive. I regard this farming culture as our own culture. Besides being beneficial, it also helps strengthen love and fraternity among people.

Gajendra Thakur: How do you interpret everyday experience in your literature?

J. P. Mandal: Every person, while living his life day by day, experiences family, society, the nation and the wider world. Just as the world is constantly in motion, so is life. But people neither have the same lifespan nor the same way of seeing; therefore their experiences differ. The scene depends upon the eye that sees it. Through everyday activity, human beings try to reach the truth of life. The more honestly a creator can bring that truth into his work, the greater the possibility that the work will endure beyond its own time. Every writer makes that effort. I am trying to do the same.

Gajendra Thakur: What would you say about the power of literature?

J. P. Mandal: It is often said that organisation itself is strength. Just as individuals come together to form a family,

families come together to form society. Literature is the mirror of that society. The stronger the society, the stronger its literature.

Gajendra Thakur: How do you analyse sin and virtue in your writing?

J. P. Mandal: Sin and virtue are connected with religion. But the social history that has come down to us has been distorted again and again until their true form has almost been destroyed. At its root, the matter is as Vyasa said: helping others is **dharma**, and causing suffering to others is sin. I do not regard this merely as an idea; I regard it as a way of life.

Gajendra Thakur: How do you bring imagination and reality together in your literature?

J. P. Mandal: Many currents run through literature, but broadly I see three: reality, imagination, and a synthesis of the two. In my view, if imagination is severed from reality, literature may become detached from life; and if reality receives no support from imagination, its presentation can often become flat. In my own writing, therefore, I take the truths I have seen and experienced in life as my foundation and, through imagination, try to reach their wider meaning. The ideas of the Vedic age underwent considerable change in the feudal period. Literature became detached from society and began circling around royal courts, at times reaching a point where it became an object of luxury and pleasure, far removed from ordinary people. My belief is that literature, while standing between the people and power, must grasp the broader truth of life. Everyone on this earth has the right to

live. I have therefore always tried to take the exploited, the afflicted and the deprived by the arm and help them stand upright.

Gajendra Thakur: The characters in your literature seem to come alive. What is the secret?

J. P. Mandal: Whenever I confront a problem or an event, I always try to look at it impartially and also to seek a solution. Perhaps that is what gives my characters their vitality.

Gajendra Thakur: What makes literary writing, particularly writing in Maithili, distinctive for you, and how do you view its priorities?

J. P. Mandal: Literature is a mirror in which the past, present and future can all be seen. Unfortunately, Maithili literature has narrowed itself and become one-sided. Certain sections of society have received more attention than necessary, with the result that literature has often become entangled in humour and amusement, while a large part of society has been pushed aside. In my own writing, I have always tried to reach that excluded society and make it part of my creative work.

Gajendra Thakur: Do you try to uncover facts that have remained hidden? If so, how? And if not, why not?

J. P. Mandal: Hidden realities can be concealed in many ways. Words can conceal an idea, clothing can conceal a body, and earth can conceal a pit. Mithila's society too contains many realities that remain hidden even though they lie directly before our eyes, simply because the observer's

gaze has seldom turned towards them. Before we see something, awareness of it first arises in the mind; the eye is only a medium for the mind. If the mind never turns in that direction, a fact may remain unseen even while standing before the eyes. I try to recognise such hidden realities and bring them into view through my writing.

Gajendra Thakur: When did you begin writing? For whom did you write then, and for whom are you writing now?

J. P. Mandal: Broadly speaking, I began writing after the year 2000. I was a student of Hindi literature, so it might have seemed more natural for me to write in Hindi. But my relationship with Maithili extended from family to society then, and it still does. There is another reason as well: the thoughts I can express with depth in Maithili cannot be expressed by me in quite the same way in Hindi. As for whom I write for, I can say this plainly: the oppressed, crushed and deprived sections of society are my principal ground. I have written for them, and whatever I write in the future will also be for them.

Gajendra Thakur: Have you ever felt that you were pushed away from the mainstream? What accounts for the tendency in your writing to look at society from outside?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, since you have raised the question of my being pushed away from the mainstream, let me answer it clearly. When rainwater repeatedly enters a river and joins its current, the river swells and its flow becomes stronger. But I see myself differently from that. My own current may be weak because its strength is still limited, but I firmly believe that as two, three and four such streams

continue to grow and come together, they may themselves become the mainstream. I therefore do not see myself as marginalised. I see myself as helping to give momentum to a new current. This is a question of ideology, not of marginalisation.

Gajendra Thakur: Is it necessary for a writer to remain completely honest with himself in his literature and creative work?

J. P. Mandal: Honesty matters not only in writing but in every sphere of life, and it always will. A writer should be like a judge. The question, however, is a difficult one. Everyone calls himself honest, but how honest a person actually is in the sphere of action and in the intellectual sphere becomes clear only through conduct. So it would not be proper for me to say much more.

Gajendra Thakur: Does the condition of Maithili literature today not suggest a collective admission of fault on the part of its writers?

J. P. Mandal: In Mithila, morality has largely been reduced to speeches. In practice, very little of it remains. One reason is that morality has been subjected to arbitrary interpretations, not merely today but for a very long time. So what exactly should be called a collective fault? Until a human being undertakes his own self-making, what can be achieved by merely repeating lessons like a parrot? Nor are all faults alike. Faults of many colours and forms are spread around us. The same person may be honest in one place and dishonest in another. There is no simple solution to this question. But if open and candid debate takes place, the

problem may be reduced to some extent.

Gajendra Thakur: Do you think your books will be translated into Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, English and other languages? If that happens, how do you think they will be received there? Will your literature be as important to those languages and cultures as it is to Maithili language and culture? Why has your writing not been independent of language and culture?

J. P. Mandal: As far as translation into other languages is concerned, the literature of any language is not meant for a limited geographical space; it belongs to the world. Language itself is regional. There are more than twenty-seven hundred languages and speech varieties in the world. A writer is born within a particular region and a particular language. He experiences the fragrance of that region's soil and water in a way that someone living far away cannot. That is why literature is translated from one language into another. A literature becomes truly rich when it moves beyond its own region and absorbs the literature of the wider world. The translation of literature from one language into another is not merely translation; it also provides an understanding of the social, economic and intellectual life of its place of origin. Literature in any language therefore becomes not merely the wealth of one region but part of the wealth of the world.

Gajendra Thakur: Your language is Maithili, yet the influence of outside languages, cultures and ideologies can sometimes be seen in your writing, though not everywhere. Why is that?

J. P. Mandal: From childhood onwards, even in Mithila, what we study at school and college includes Hindi

and English. Hindi is regarded as our national language, so its presence seems natural. But what about English? When we study English literature, we also read the stories, novels, poems and plays of English writers. From childhood, therefore, English language and culture begin to make a home in the mind. Later, when we begin to write, those impressions start moving through the mind like images on a cinema reel. The state of literary creation, however, is somewhat different. When a creator's mind begins to move within the emotional world of a work, language becomes secondary. However carefully one may try to keep influences apart, some mixing and blending inevitably takes place.

As far as ideology is concerned, Marxist thought spread to many parts of the world in the nineteenth century and, in some places, even changed systems of government. Yet the Indian intellectual tradition too is a tradition concerned with humanity. Although there are some differences between the methods of Marxist thought and Indian thought, their aims are closely related. Both point towards human welfare. Some degree of interaction between them is therefore natural.

Gajendra Thakur: Your work has received enormous publicity after this award. How are you experiencing that?

J. P. Mandal: Whether publicity is little or great is not the real question. The real question is how many people have found some direction for their lives through my writing. If someone brings something from my work into his own life and benefits from it, that is the real achievement. The more people who can do so, the more I shall feel that my creative work has acquired meaning, and the greater my satisfaction will be.

Gajendra Thakur: Which of your works, perhaps a particular story, should I read first? In other words, which of your own writings is dearest to you?

J. P. Mandal: I shall answer that in two ways. First, my works are before you in the order in which they were written. I would say: read them in that order. Second, I am like a parent whose one son becomes an IAS officer while another has a physical disability. A parent looks upon both with the same eyes. I look upon my writings in much the same way. It is therefore difficult for me to say which is good and which is not. ❑

(Interview: 2011)

Answers to the Questions of Manoj Kumar Karn 'Munnaji', Assistant Editor of *Videha e-Journal*

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Munnaji: Jagdish Babu, despite having completed higher education, why did you turn to writing in Maithili so late?

J. P. Mandal: Munnaji, before answering your question, let me say a little about myself. At Kejriwal Higher Secondary School, Jhanjharpur, from Special Ninth to Special Eleventh, I studied Maithili as a full subject carrying one hundred marks. I did not, however, study Maithili at college; there I studied Hindi. I had always loved literature, but I moved seriously towards writing only after the year 2000. I would say simply this: after struggle on the ground, intellectual struggle gathers force, and at that stage writing became unavoidable for me. It gave greater strength to my life as well. Every human being, I believe, should begin life from the ground beneath his own feet. My field of action was my village, whose language is Maithili. That is why, although I was a student of Hindi, I write in Maithili. Another reason for

beginning late was that in 1967, while I was a B.A. student, I became involved in left-wing politics. Whatever time remained after earning my livelihood, I began devoting to public service. I studied up to B.A. at Janata College, Jhanjharpur, and later at C. M. College, Darbhanga. There is one more reason for writing: with age, physical strength also begins to decline.

Munnaji: With so many qualifications, including M.A. degrees in two subjects, getting a job in those days should not have been very difficult. What does your decision to take up farming rather than employment reveal about your way of thinking?

J. P. Mandal: Seen from today, it may appear that jobs were easy to obtain then, but that was not so. Let me explain the circumstances. Bihar at that time included Jharkhand. Even undivided Bihar did not have as many districts, subdivisions and blocks as the truncated Bihar of today. Nor was there the present variety of employment. Today Bihar has thirty-six or thirty-seven districts; at that time there were only seventeen. Madhubani, which now has five subdivisions, was itself only a subdivision then. The same was true in the field of education. There were only a limited number of colleges and high schools. In what is now Madhubani district, colleges opened at Jhanjharpur, Sarso, Pandaul and Babubarhi. The J. N. College at Babubarhi later shifted to Madhubani. Before these, there was R. K. College and perhaps one more. The rest came later. When Janata College opened at Jhanjharpur, more than half its teachers came from other districts. This does not mean that the area had no educated people; the opportunities themselves were limited. There were nowhere near as many

bank branches as there are today. Perhaps Madhubani had one, while elsewhere there were almost none. The same was true of blocks. Their number was smaller, and there used to be a single B.D.O.; today there are separate B.D.O., C.O. and P.O. posts. In the name of industry, there was one sugar mill at Lohat and a handful of rice mills. There is much more that could be said, but this gives the broad picture. Now you tell me, where were the jobs? In proportion to the population, there are more opportunities today.

As for why I took up farming, my father died when I was only three years old. My elder brother was three years older than I. Two cousins, the sons of my father's sister, also lived with us. Their home was in Harinahi village, in Amhi Panchayat of Ghoghardiha block, within the Phulparas Assembly constituency. When the Kosi turned forcefully westwards, their village was uprooted and everyone moved to Berma. This happened sometime between 1935 and 1940. When the Kosi later shifted eastwards again, the two brothers returned to their village in 1960. After they left, I had to manage the household while continuing my studies. From then on, I became closely tied to farming, which was also our means of livelihood.

Munnaji: In the beginning you called yourself a communist and were actively involved in agitation and confrontation against feudalism. Why did you later become disillusioned with it? What did you gain or lose through that struggle?

J. P. Mandal: I am what I was. But circumstances have to be seen with open eyes. The human structure created under feudalism changes when feudalism itself is struck. Social

development and social life are not like a tale or a theatrical stage. On a stage, within three hours, Rama may be born, the bow-sacrifice may take place at Janakpur, Sita may be abducted in the forest, Ravana may be killed, and the performance may end. A tale can do the same. But the stage of society is far more complicated. It takes time and requires struggle; beyond physical struggle there is an even more intense struggle of ideas.

To put it briefly, when new and improved varieties of seed arrived as part of agricultural development, people with a feudal outlook opposed them. Their objections were: first, the produce would have no taste; second, it would be ritually impure for festivals and observances; and third, the use of fertiliser would be harmful to health and increase disease. There was similar opposition when the hospital at Darbhanga opened. Allopathic medicine was resisted in villages on the allegation that injections contained cow's blood and medicines were made from pig flesh. When hand-pumps began replacing ordinary wells, they too were opposed. People said that the washer in the pump was made of leather, so how could such water be used for worship, and how could people drink water rendered impure in that way? There are countless such examples. This is what is called a period of transition. When feudalism breaks down, capitalist and socialist directions emerge.

About ninety per cent of the land in my village once belonged to outsiders. There were four zamindars; the original Maithili text describes two others by the unclear word mas, which requires clarification. As soon as the people's struggle began, two landowners sold their land. With another there was a fierce struggle. Alongside the zamindars stood

moneylending mahajans, and there was struggle against them too. Today there is neither an outside zamindar nor a mahajan in the village. No one now owns an excessively large holding. The largest holdings are around ten bighas, and the rest are smaller. That struggle continued in the village for roughly thirty years. The storm that rose around 1970–71 finally subsided when the last court case ended on 5 May 2005.

Development itself is a process. Looking at today's large machines and computers, a younger person may find it difficult to imagine their beginnings. Yet work once performed entirely by hand moved first to hand-operated tools, then to small machines, and those small machines were progressively refined into the large and powerful machines we see today.

Munnaji: Someone has said that your image as a rebellious communist faded when you accepted inducements offered by feudal interests. Is that true?

J. P. Mandal: Munnaji, I think the answer to that fourth question is already contained in what I have said. If not, any further answer would amount to firing a shot without knowing where the target is.

Munnaji: How did a militant tendency turn into a creative one? Was there any particular event that inspired your creative thinking?

J. P. Mandal: The answer to the fifth question has also already emerged. What the world called the Cold War was itself an ideological struggle, and literature is one of the principal weapons of such a struggle.

Munnaji: A common tendency among Maithili writers is to produce one or two works and then begin striving to establish themselves within the Maithili literary stream. You seem to have done the opposite: you remained thoughtful and productive, yet almost hidden. Why?

J. P. Mandal: My understanding is clear. Small streams descend from the northern hills, wind southwards, join rivers and channels, reach the Ganga and finally merge into the sea. In the same way, if literature, or creative writing, has the right direction and purpose, it will inevitably become a literary current. I have faith in that. I did not move towards writing from the very beginning in the way some others did. The reasons for that have already been explained.

Munnaji: In the foreword to one of your books, Viyogiji says that when you first met him carrying manuscripts of twenty stories and five novels, your vision became clearer, and that when he met you again two years later he saw a marked development. What do you think about that?

J. P. Mandal: Viyogiji is the first writer from the Maithili literary world whom I met personally. We had spoken once or twice by telephone before that. When Umesh went to Patna, he met him and took some of my writings along. He also read a few pages aloud to him. But during their hour and a half or two hours together, much of the conversation was naturally about getting to know one another.

My own first meeting with Viyogiji took place in Madhubani when he came there. During that meeting, he also told me about the story gathering at Rahua and invited me to

attend. A 2003 issue of the magazine Deshaj, edited by him, came into my hands at a bookshop in Nirmali. It included conversations involving Yatriji and Kiranji. In terms of thought, I had been influenced by Yatriji since my student days. Reading that magazine deepened that influence and also increased my attraction towards Viyogiji. I had likewise been deeply influenced by Kiranji's life since my college years and had seen him at close quarters. When I studied at C. M. College, he was a professor there. In conversation he once said, "Write Maithili the way you speak it." That thought entered my very veins then and remains there even today.

Munnaji: In that same foreword he says that you are such an ardent admirer of his that you kept searching for his books to read them and even travelled as far as Patna in search of one. Given the shortage of people who actually buy and read Maithili books, if this is true, what explains it?

J. P. Mandal: The answer to this question too is already present in what I have said. It is certainly true that he did me the kindness of giving me many books. But the language of "devotee" and "deity" belongs to sectarian thinking. A person rises or falls through his own actions. I regard it as wrong to think badly of someone in advance and then act on that assumption.

Munnaji: In a relatively short span of time, eight of your books in different genres have been published. How does that make you feel, and what is your next goal?

J. P. Mandal: I felt much as any other writer feels when a book is published. As for the goal, a line of Prasad comes to mind:

"Life's purpose is not to settle in a quiet dwelling,
but to reach those paths beyond which no path yet lies."

Munnaji: Even after the publication of so many books, there has been no substantial critical assessment of your work and no selection for an award. Does that ever make your labour seem futile?

J. P. Mandal: Time evaluates every work. Whether a work is in tune with its age is something only time can judge. As for awards, what award did Premchand, the great emperor of the novel and magician of the pen, receive? Yet he never regarded his labour as futile. He continued serving literature until his last breath. On his seventy-fifth birthday, Namvar Bhai, Dr Namvar Singh, said, "What I have done so far, I shall do again in the next five years." The extent of his service is known to everyone. If a seventy-five-year-old elder can say that, I still consider myself young.

Munnaji: How do you view the divisions of caste that have existed in Maithili society from the beginning? And where do you place yourself within them?

J. P. Mandal: From the beginning, I have believed not in varna but in class. I have worked on that basis and continue to do so. The games played in society in the name of caste and religion, or sect, are strategies of those who practise politics.

Munnaji: Would you like to support writers emerging creatively from backward communities and help them rise? Do you have any message for them?

J. P. Mandal: Where the question is of changing a system, it cannot be done in a single day, nor can one person

accomplish it alone. The welfare at stake belongs to everyone, and everyone must take part in bringing it about. So I say to all of them: wake up, rise and stand. Move forward. Mithila is everyone's motherland and Maithili is everyone's language. Regard them as your own and devote yourself to their service.❑

Answers to the Questions of Mukesh Dutt, Editor of *Mithilangan*

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Mukesh Dutt: Tell us briefly about your early life.

J. P. Mandal: I was born in Berma village, into a middle-income family belonging to what I would call a middle-ranking caste. Let me make the distinction clear. Broadly speaking, Hindu society may be seen as divided into those placed above, those placed below and those in between. By a middle-ranking caste, I mean this intermediate social position. Economically too, ours was a middle-level family, one that possessed enough land to sustain itself. There were, of course, large cultivators or substantial raiyati landholders on one side, and landless people, some without even homestead land, on the other. Our family stood between these two.

My father was the only brother in his generation, so ours was a compact family living under the care of my parents. We were two brothers, my elder brother being three years older than I. My father died when I was only three. Thereafter the family continued under my mother's care. We had roughly a one-plough holding, and cultivation was carried

on with the help of sharecroppers and ploughmen. Two cousins, the sons of my father's sister, also lived with us. As their village lay near the Kosi, it had been destroyed by the river. The two brothers helped to some extent with cultivation and also grazed buffaloes. In 1960, when their village, Harinahi, became habitable again, they returned there.

There was a Lower Primary School in the village, housed in a mud-walled building. It collapsed in the earthquake of 1934. The villagers regarded the site as inauspicious and shifted the school elsewhere. My elder brother was admitted there first. From the age of five, I too began going to school with him. In those days the school functioned in two shifts. There was only one teacher, who also visited our family quite frequently.

Mukesh Dutt: How did your inclination towards Maithili literature develop?

J. P. Mandal: Just as anyone growing up among a people becomes connected with their language and literature from childhood, so did I. Poetry and stories influenced me particularly. At the high-school level, students used to divide into Arts, Science and Commerce. Perhaps fifteen to twenty per cent chose Science, five to ten per cent Commerce, while the rest studied Arts. I had no clear understanding of subjects then; I simply developed a strong desire to pass the matriculation examination.

From the Lower Primary School in my village, I went to the Upper Primary School at Kachhubi and later enrolled at the Middle School there. After passing Middle School, I enrolled at Kejriwal High School, Jhanjharpur. After Higher

Secondary, I joined Janata College. By then my ambition had changed: I decided that I would complete an M.A. Eight people from my village had already obtained B.A. degrees from general colleges, but no one had yet completed an M.A. There were, however, several distinguished Sanskrit scholars from the village who had served at institutions such as Deepak Sanskrit College, the college at Nawani, Lagma College and other colleges. Some still do.

Janata College did not offer Hindi Honours, although I was a student of Hindi. Later I enrolled at C. M. College, from where I completed my M.A. During my college years, in 1967, I became associated with left-wing politics and the Communist Party. By the time I completed my M.A., I had made up my mind not to take a salaried job. I therefore never made any attempt to seek employment.

Mukesh Dutt: What inspired your first creative work?

J. P. Mandal: I had been reading poems and stories since childhood and had memorised many poems. Occasionally I too felt like writing a poem or story and would write something, but none of those early pieces was preserved. I cannot say that I began writing under the influence or patronage of any particular person. After I had written stories and novels, I showed them to Brother Mantreshwar Jha, Dr Taranand Viyogi and Dr Shiv Shankar Srinivas. Each offered his own comments and suggestions. I am glad that even today I continue to read my work to Mantreshwar Bhai and seek his opinion. He once described me as a "magician of language".

My approach to political action, however, had its own

background. Bhogendraji entered Parliament for the first time in 1967. He was young and a powerful speaker. Under his influence, we took up some of the major inequalities within society. A movement for sharecroppers' rights arose against the zamindars, and a campaign for freedom from debt was launched against usurious mahajans. Conditions in the village had become so miserable that people were living on borrowed money simply to survive, quite apart from the expenses of marriages and other family obligations. Four absentee zamindars owned three-quarters, about seventy-five per cent, of the village land.

Our region has always suffered from flood and drought. The country too was in such a condition that even after Independence foodgrain had to be imported from other countries. After 1974–75, agricultural production began to rise steadily, and by around 1990 the atmosphere in the village had become calmer. The zamindars had left, and the old moneylending system had also come to an end. The District Magistrate of Madhubani, Nityanand Singh, personally came and distributed certificates releasing people from debt. This changed the atmosphere considerably.

Around sixty court cases had spread through the village, though by then everyone had begun to realise that many of them were continuing for no useful reason. Courts, however, are sticky places; once a case enters them, getting out takes time. By the year 2000 only one case remained, Case No. 436, which had arisen from possession of a zamindar's land. It continued for thirty-five years and was finally disposed of by a Fast Track Court in April 2005. Twenty-eight of us were defendants in that case.

By around 2000, my thinking had also changed. During

the movements against usury and exploitative sharecropping, society had simultaneously turned its attention towards improving agriculture, and crop yields increased considerably. But if society was to change at the level of thought, literature too was necessary. That is why I began writing.

My first story was Bhaintak Laba. From there came the story collection Gamak Jingi, published in 2009 with the assistance of Gajendraji, Shri Gajendra Thakur. Brother Dr Premshankar Singh, who had retired as a professor from Tilka Manjhi University, was delighted when Gamak Jingi came into his hands and expressed a desire to write a review. Illness, however, had caused his hands to tremble, making writing difficult for him, and he was unable to do so.

Mukesh Dutt: In which genres have you written, and which do you most enjoy writing? Please tell us briefly.

J. P. Mandal: How can I say whether a genre is good or unsuitable for me if I have never worked in it? One discovers an affinity only after entering a form. Leaving aside genres I have not attempted, I began writing short stories and novels almost together. Sometimes I would write a story one day and work on a novel the next. That pattern continues even now. Recently I had been writing stories, and three collections were released at the Sagar Rati Deep Jaray gathering in Kabilpur. For the next programme, I have three novels ready. This year's rain and flooding shook me so deeply that I am now writing stories connected with flood and rainfall.

The novel and the short story took hold of me at the beginning of my literary life and have never loosened their grip, so how can I say which is better or worse? I have also

written plays and one-act plays. In today's mobile-phone age, whether dramatic writing in our region will remain theatre or become principally literature for reading is itself a question, so I shall not offer an opinion on that.

I have also written more than five hundred poems, published in nearly twelve collections. I have not stopped writing poetry, though I do not write it regularly. When an occasion for a poetry reading arises, I may write a poem. Yet after writing poetry I often feel dissatisfied. I feel unable to express fully what I want to say. On the one hand, public recitation imposes the limitation of time; on the other, metre and poetic ornament have their own domain. What kind of poetry is possible without metre and ornament? That question too remains in my mind. So I continue to feel dissatisfied that poetry does not always allow me to say everything I wish to say.

Mukesh Dutt: Whom do you regard as your inspiration in Maithili literature? What have been the sources of your literary inspiration?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, within its own limits your question is entirely natural, because we see things before our eyes and also hear about them. But before answering it directly, there is another question within it: who, precisely, has been the source of inspiration? I shall not go deeply into that here. I would only say that the life I have lived has itself shaped both my thoughts and my actions and has made my life what it is.

Beyond that, I have not been inspired by one individual alone. Collectively, there are thousands of people from whom I have drawn inspiration, and many of them are writers.

Inevitably, some individuals must have influenced me more than others. But influence is a matter of the mind: whose language, whose emotions and whose work left what impression?

As Tulsidas, reaching a point of helplessness, said, “Ko bar chhot kahat aparadhu...” – “Who can call one great and another small without giving offence?” In much the same spirit, I can only say that Mithila has been the land of one revered figure after another. A land endowed with fertility like Kamadhenu has never been barren and never will be. If the country has problems, Mithila’s problems are among the most pressing. Family and social relationships that endured for thousands of years are suddenly breaking apart. In such a situation, the question of preserving one’s identity inevitably arises.

Mukesh Dutt: Your writing is rooted in a rural environment and filled with scenes from real life. Why is this so?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, human beings in a sense create their own environment for themselves. I shall not enter into a theoretical discussion of environment here. I shall simply say that I have spent seventy-four or seventy-five years of my life in a village, and that has given me ample opportunity to observe village life closely. I have witnessed great floods, droughts and earthquakes and seen their consequences with my own eyes. We all know that what one has seen with one’s own eyes carries a special force of truth. To discuss all three, flood, drought and earthquake, would make the answer too long, so let me mention only two incidents connected with earthquakes.

The first concerns the earthquake of 1934. In Jhanjharpur market lived the family of Jaydev Chaudhary, traders belonging to the Bania community. Their house and shop stood in the centre of the market. In the earthquake, everything collapsed, from the shop to the residential quarters. Of a family of eleven, nine were crushed to death beneath the building. Only Jaydev Chaudhary and a sister who was unable to speak survived. His mind was shattered. Jhanjharpur market itself had been devastated, and his own family had been almost completely destroyed.

Leaving Jhanjharpur, Jaydev Chaudhary came to the home of my maternal grandmother. By "my maternal grandmother" I mean that there were two sisters whom I regarded as grandmothers; the younger sister was married in Berma. Her household was well established. She had no children, and therefore took a greater interest in religious and charitable activities. People in neighbouring villages too generally know which households are known for what kind of conduct. Jaydev Chaudhary settled in Berma. He married and established a household, but had no children, and with him that family line came to an end.

The second incident concerns the earthquake of 1987. About two bighas from my house lived a Brahmin family. Kedarnath Jha, from that family, was a friend of mine. By friend I mean that he was one class ahead of me, though we studied at the same school, and living in the same locality created many other social ties. After matriculation, he trained as a teacher and became a middle-school teacher.

The earthquake struck at about half past two or three in the morning. Kedarbabu's was a mud-walled house. It

collapsed while the family slept. All three members of the household died; only a five-year-old son survived. People came to know of it only after daybreak, around six, because everyone had been occupied with checking his own family, house and courtyard. Then word spread that a particular house had fallen. When people went to investigate, they discovered that the whole family lay buried inside. As the wall was cleared away, a leg became visible. The debris was then carefully removed and all three bodies were brought out.

Before the earthquake itself, there had been four or five loud sounds. They woke me. I went to the window, thinking perhaps a heavy vehicle was passing along the road, but I saw nothing. I immediately came out, went into the courtyard and woke everyone, saying that an earthquake was coming. We all left the house and courtyard and moved into the open garden.

Hearing what had happened, I later went to Kedarbabu's house. What I saw left me speechless. A single five-year-old child from an educated and well-established family had been left alone on this earth, without mother or father. What kind of future would that child have? Be that as it may, let me return to the landscape of my own life.

From my high-school years onwards, particularly from 1960, some responsibility for the household had already begun to fall upon my shoulders. Ours was a farming family, so simply by watching others I had acquired some practical experience.

My M.A. classes had ended, but examinations were running three batches behind; even the two batches before mine had not yet been examined. After 1967, a powerful political wave swept the country, particularly Bihar. For the

first time, a non-Congress government was formed in Bihar, and new people entered power. A government under Mahamaya Babu came to office with new programmes. It lasted only eighteen months, after which elections were held again. The second time too, a non-Congress government was formed, under Karpoori Thakur. I shall not go further into that here. What matters is that my mind had become completely settled on two things: farming as my livelihood and service to society. Influenced by left-wing politics, I also felt that the political field was open and offered opportunities for action.

Just as movements arose around sharecropping and usury, society was also mobilised around every aspect of agricultural production. Yields increased both on my own land and across the village. New kinds of agricultural practices began, while older ones were renewed in fresh forms. Pusa 21 paddy seed and Sonara 64 wheat seed arrived, producing astonishing increases in yield. Later came Saket and Sita varieties of paddy. Dozens of farmers from the village began participating in agricultural programmes, moving from the village to the block and district levels and on to programmes at Pusa and Dholi colleges. In a village where one kattha had once yielded roughly thirty kilograms of paddy, yields rose to about 130 kilograms per kattha under the local measure.

My attention extended to almost every aspect of agricultural life, both personally and socially. I became so absorbed in work that there was scarcely time left even for cards or chess. Life itself became so active that there was no need for “Ramdev Yoga”.

Mukesh Dutt: As a writer, how do you view the harmony between the mental worlds of writer and reader?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, first we have to consider the mental level of both writer and reader. When there is some harmony between their intellectual and emotional levels, a work reaches the reader naturally. But when the distance between them is too great, differences in reception arise. If the writer stands at nineteen and the reader at twenty, the work may seem somewhat underdeveloped to the reader; if the writer stands at twenty and the reader at nineteen, it may appear raw and uneven, with a mixture of bitterness and sweetness.

I have tried to keep the course of my writing connected with society. There is inevitably a difference between my early work and what I write now, because experience and vision change with time. A reader who follows the works in sequence will understand this transformation more easily.

The central question is how fully a work can grasp the lives of the majority and the social structure in which they live. Distances have arisen within the social current inherited from the past; how can they be brought into greater harmony? That question remains. Literature that understands the present environment and can offer society some direction will therefore be more useful.

Just as fish live at different levels within the same water according to the conditions suited to them, human beings too live within a shared social environment according to their position, experience and struggle. One task of literature is to recognise those lives and give their truths a place in creative work.

Mukesh Dutt: As a dramatist, what do you expect from readers and audiences?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, we have already touched upon drama. The world visible to the previous generation and the one before us today have moved very far apart. Its consequences are already being felt in society: people from a village may now have to introduce their own fathers and grandfathers to others within that very village.

Mukesh Dutt: Please say something about the present condition and direction of Maithili literature.

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, if literary creation flowed in a single current, it would be easy to identify its condition and direction. But that is not the case. Creative writing flows through many currents. Our Vedic literature is concerned with the welfare of all, and in that sense our roots are sound. It has been said: "Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu niramayah..." – "May all be happy; may all be free from illness."

But as time moved forward and human development proceeded, cunning and manipulation increasingly entered thought. That is perhaps natural too, for our society had to spend thousands of years under subjugation. I shall not enter into that now. What concerns us here is the direction in which literary creativity before Independence and literary creativity after Independence have been moving.

Everyone says that the joint family is disappearing. Even within one's own family, people are becoming almost strangers to one another. In such circumstances, what can one say, and where should one begin?

Many kinds of guiding ideas are already present on society's intellectual stage. What do the Vedas say? What does the Gita say? What did the Buddha teach? What did Mahavira say? What did Vivekananda say? What does Tulsidas, through Rama in the Ramayana, tell us? What does Surdas say through Krishna? What does Kabir say through his nirguna Rama? All these streams of thought are already present within society.

Differences of thought have existed within the scriptures from the beginning. Some accept Advaita, others Dvaita; within these debates stand Dvaitadvaita, Vishishtadvaita and other positions. Differences exist between the traditions associated with the Buddha and Mahavira too: one speaks of bahujana hitaya, the welfare of the many, while another speaks of the welfare of all. Even within Buddhist thought, Hinayana and Mahayana arose as distinct currents.

Editorji, I have described Mithila as I understand it. Many other aspects of life fall outside this brief discussion. But ultimately, whether a work is impartial or directed towards human welfare, its task is to serve as a mirror through which society may see its condition and its direction.

Mukesh Dutt: Many established practices in the literary world have suppressed promising newcomers and even excellent writers. How do you see this?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, I regard that as the play of a narrow mentality and therefore keep myself apart from it. I have an independent life and believe in thinking independently and impartially.

My first work was the story collection Gamak Jingi. In

2008, a Sagar Rati Deep Jaray programme was held at the Parasnath temple in Rahua, Madhubani district, where many writers had assembled. I read my story Bhaintak Laba there. Nearly an hour was spent discussing the word bhaint itself. Be that as it may, Gamak Jingi was published in 2009, with Bhaintak Laba as its opening story. Thus the story had already come before a literary gathering prior to its publication. Ramanji immediately took the story and published it in the journal Ghar-Bahar.

In 2011, Maithili received the Tagore Literature Award in the cycle covering twenty-four languages, and the award came to Gamak Jingi. The nomination had come through the Sahitya Akademi, and the award was associated with the Korean government. Given the events I have personally experienced, how can I simply close my eyes and say that the Sahitya Akademi is at fault? In the same way, many literary platforms have honoured me with the Yatri Samman, Babusaheb Chaudhary Samman, Videha Samman, Vaideha Samman, Kaushiki Samman and honours from Assam in the eastern region, among others.

To emerging writers I would say this: our society has long recognised that greed leads a person away from the right path and towards decline. Keep away from greed and shape an independent life for yourself, so that with an independent mind you may serve both society and literature. Globalisation has undoubtedly struck every aspect of social life with considerable force. Yet human beings remain human beings, sovereign within their own minds, and will find ways of adjusting themselves to changing times.

Mukesh Dutt: To what extent, and in what ways, are Maithils, both writers and society, responsible for the present condition of Maithili literature?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, writers and society are two separate questions and must therefore be considered separately. I shall not give a long answer. I would say simply that some writers who have remained close to power have not treated writers from new and socially backward families as they ought to have been treated. As a result, a considerable distance has grown among writers themselves.

As for society, society is what it is and has many forms and colours. Taken as a whole, however, society is like a gentle cow: the way you tend it will determine the kind of milk it gives you.

Mukesh Dutt: A writer's first effort is to reach the reader's heart. How successful do you consider yourself in doing so through your writing?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, it is not for a writer to declare his own work successful. The reader judges a work's effect and its value. I can only speak about my creative process.

My life so far has remained rooted in village soil. I therefore believe that countless people like me live in villages, with lives, problems, struggles and experiences connected to one another. Villages shape society, and society in turn continually shapes and changes the village. Within a single village, many colours, many social levels and many kinds of life exist side by side.

In my writing, when I take such social life as my subject, I try to remain on its real ground. I have seen,

endured and experienced many of its problems. I therefore try to touch not only their outward appearance but also the pain within them, their struggles and their social causes. How far my work reaches the reader's heart is for the reader to decide. I cannot reasonably say more than that on my own behalf.

Mukesh Dutt: Alongside your regular occupation, you have pursued literary work and enriched Maithili literature with a large body of writing. What are your plans for the future?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, your question separates literary work from the work by which one lives. Yet both belong within life itself. One is an economic occupation and the other an intellectual one. There is a difference between body and mind, but both are part of life. My life has followed a regular discipline. Just as I devote fixed time to earning a livelihood, I also devote fixed time to creative work. In that way both kinds of work continue at their own pace. What more can I really do?

As for plans for the future, I see past, present and future as three divisions of time. What more is there to say? I live in the present, and the actions of the present will create whatever future emerges. I have no particular fantasy or dream stored away for the future.

Mukesh Dutt: Is there any literary genre in which you have not yet worked but hope to write in the near future?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, I have already said in answer to the previous question that I live in the present. At present I am working on stories and novels, so I do not have another particular genre in mind. Literary forms are endless. As

Tulsidas said, “Hari anant, Hari katha ananta” – “Hari is infinite, and infinite are the stories of Hari.” Literature too is like that. In such a fathomless ocean, how much can one person ever measure? My wish is simply that the mind should remain awake with the body, and the body with the mind, and that both should continue to move together.

Mukesh Dutt: Finally, would you like to give any message to young writers?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, what message can I give to the young? They themselves are the bearers of the message. Let them awaken their own strength and come to know themselves, so that their youth is not swept away in the current. What more need I say? ❑

Dialogue:
With Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal
- Saumya Jha

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J. P. Mandal: Thank you for your interest, Saumyaji. Please ask whatever you would like to know about me.

Saumya Jha: Would you tell our readers in some detail about your village and birthplace, your education and your family background?

J. P. Mandal: My birthplace is Berma village. Though it is a relatively small village, it has been a panchayat since 1952. In the earthquake of 1934, the village school, which was housed in a mud-walled building, collapsed. The villagers regarded the site as inauspicious, and the school was rebuilt elsewhere. My education began at that Lower Primary School, which now teaches up to Class VIII. I later studied at Kachhubi Middle School, Kejriwal High School in Jhanjharpur, Janata College and C. M. College, Darbhanga. I completed my Honours degree and M.A. at C. M. College.

My family had originally come from elsewhere and settled in Berma. Our ancestral home was about three kos east of Janakpur. My forefathers came from there to Berma. There is an interesting story behind that migration; perhaps I shall

tell it on another occasion.

I am the younger of two brothers. My elder brother was three years older than I. My father died when I was three years old. My mother was then about twenty-five or thirty. My father had no brother, so the family thereafter moved forward under my mother's care. I continued to receive her care and affection until 1993.

Saumya Jha: When did your literary journey begin? Please tell us in some detail about the course of that journey.

J. P. Mandal: My literary journey began after the year 2000, when I was already over fifty. Just as King Dasharatha, seeing grey hair near his ears, began thinking of handing the throne to Rama, I too, feeling my body beginning to slow down, set out on my literary journey. Every three months, the literary programme Sagar Rati Deep Jaray is held, and at these gatherings at least two, sometimes three, of my books are released. I have more than a hundred published books in genres including short stories, novels, poetry, drama and one-act plays.

Saumya Jha: What was the greatest challenge you faced during your literary journey?

J. P. Mandal: The challenge may be understood from the fact that even a writer such as Phanishwar Nath 'Renu' could not find a place in the Maithili literary world. Before 1960, Renuji also wrote in Maithili. It is our misfortune that the Maithili world lost a writer who was honoured with a Padma award. What the challenge is, therefore, lies before all of us. If we remain in touch, there will be opportunities to

speak further about it.

Saumya Jha: You received the Sahitya Akademi Award for Pangu. First of all, congratulations. How did the idea of Pangu come to you, and what is the novel about?

J. P. Mandal: The idea of the novel Pangu was not imported from outside. Pangu is one of my twenty novels. Historically, however, it may be seen as a further link in the tradition of Balchanma by Vaidyanath Mishra 'Yatri', who is also known in the Hindi literary world as Nagarjun.

Saumya Jha: Which book should we look forward to next? What are your future plans?

J. P. Mandal: At the next Sagar Rati Deep Jaray story gathering, to be held on Saturday, 31 December 2022, at Rahua Sangram under the convenorship of Dr Ashok Kumar Jha 'Avichal', three of my books will be released: two collections of short stories and one novel. Just as Ko Bar Chhot Kahat Aparadhu belongs to the journey in short fiction that brought me the Tagore Literature Award, my journey in the novel brought me the Sahitya Akademi Award. I therefore have no particular goal before me. What I have is continuity: whatever comes at a given time, I take it as it comes.

Saumya Jha: The younger generation is writing a great deal in Maithili these days. What advice or tips would you give them?

J. P. Mandal: Do not forget the past, but make the present your life.

Saumya Jha: What message would you give to those writing literature in Maithili? Is there any particular subject on which you feel writing is still especially needed?

J. P. Mandal: What can I tell writers? They themselves should know what kind of relationship literature ought to have with power, and how literature should conduct itself in relation to power. ❑

Maithili Literature: The Contemporary Scenario

A Dialogue with Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Sanjeev Sinha

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Sanjeev Sinha: What standing does Maithili literature enjoy within Indian literature?

J. P. Mandal: Maithili literature enjoys a standing comparable to that of other Indian literatures. The richness and prestige of any literature depend upon the society from which it emerges, because literature is the mirror of society. The character of a society's life inevitably shapes the standing of its literature. Social life, in turn, also depends upon the geographical features, environment and other conditions of the region. Seen from this perspective, Maithili literature and Maithil society are both ancient and rich. Mithila has long understood the importance of ethical values and has also sought to shape its life accordingly. This does not mean, of course, that Maithil society has ever been completely uniform, nor is it so today.

Even before Independence, before 1947, the country was divided into many states and regions, and it remains so today. Before Independence, the divisions were even greater. There were thousands of small kingdoms and principalities, each with its own political authority, art and culture. Some of these traditions were distinctive, while others were shared with neighbouring regions. Their literatures naturally developed in accordance with those conditions.

In the present literary world, Maithili too enjoys a standing comparable to that of other Indian literatures. It has an established place in M.A. and Ph.D. studies, the Civil Services and other spheres among the twenty-two recognised languages. One deficiency, however, is that Padma awards have not come to Maithili with the regularity seen in some other language-literatures.

In conclusion, I would say that Maithili literature possesses a standing comparable to that of other Indian literatures. We should not have even the slightest doubt about that.

Sanjeev Sinha: What is the present landscape of Maithili literature?

J. P. Mandal: The landscape is before us all. Literature is not something separate from society. If we look at the condition of society, we can also understand the condition of its literature. Our rohu fish and Maldah mango are still much as they were in the time of our forefathers. The question is: did Mithila produce no scientist capable of improving its finest fruits and fish through research and development and taking them to markets across the world?

Let us cover the past with a handful of ashes and turn

instead to what we need today.

Government schemes have reduced some of the pressures of economic life, but society's problems are not limited to food alone. Dowry and the present form of education are creating economic pressure and fragmentation within families. If literature fails to grasp this changing life, the distance between literature and society will increase.

The problems in the realm of thought are no less serious. Caste divisions still exist in society, and within castes themselves there are many further divisions based on lineage and family background. As long as one person continues to regard another as inferior, hostility will remain. The question before Maithili literature is how deeply it can see these realities and how far it can give society a direction in which to think. What responsibility falls upon us in this situation is something we ourselves must consider.

As far as literary richness is concerned, Maithili is not behind other languages in creative production. It is also an ancient language. When Maithili itself has writers who have written eight hundred stories and twenty novels, there is no reason for us to carry any sense of inferiority about our language or literature. If we look at Maithili from the perspective of its writers, what has been achieved over roughly the past hundred and twenty-five years is there before us to see.

Sanjeev Sinha: What schools of thought, debates and movements have taken place in Maithili literature? Which literary tendency is dominant at present?

J. P. Mandal: If we look at movements in the history of Maithili language and literature, Banaras, Bengal and Bihar all have important places. In Banaras, handwritten journals and the sustained labour of writers such as Kanchinath Jha 'Kiran' helped create a path for Maithili to enter the university system. Bengal too produced one distinguished champion of Maithili after another. The University of Calcutta was the first to accord recognition to the Maithili language. In Bihar as well, continuous activity in support of the language and literature has taken place, though not everywhere with equal intensity.

At the level of literary schools and debate, questions relating to society, caste and varna, women, exploitation, folk life, language and changing values have arisen from time to time. In my view, however, more important than the name of any particular "ism" is the question of how fully literature is able to grasp the truth of life in its own time.

As for the dominant tendency in contemporary literature, it remains to a considerable extent oriented towards the past. What is needed is to make it more contemporary. We are now living in the scientific age of the twenty-first century. Our tools have changed and the pace of time has changed. New technology completes in a short time tasks that once required much longer. The subjects, perspectives and modes of expression in literature must therefore move forward with the times as well.

Sanjeev Sinha: What problems and challenges confront Maithili literature?

J. P. Mandal: Editorji, we should first distinguish between a problem and a challenge. We may also look at them across two periods: first, problems and challenges inherited

from the past; and second, problems and challenges belonging to the present.

Just as language has faced problems, literature has faced them too. Script is also a vehicle of language, but where children still cannot reach school, becoming entangled only in disputes over script cannot be the solution.

Literature is both a mirror of society and a medium through which society may gain a sense of direction. The question is how closely literature remains connected with social life. Literature may have been well-intentioned at the level of ideas, but in many places it has remained distant from practical life. Reducing that distance is one of the major challenges of the present. Challenges will always remain, but they have to be faced through thought and action suited to the needs of the time.

Sanjeev Sinha: What kind of dialogue exists between Maithili writers and writers of other languages of Mithila, such as Angika and Bajjika?

J. P. Mandal: Bihar has been home to many languages and speech varieties not merely today but for a very long time. Society has lived among them, literature has continued to develop among them, and dialogue between them has also continued. The dialogue between writers of Angika, Bajjika and Maithili should therefore be seen within this wider social and cultural relationship.

Languages preserve their own regional identities, yet they do not live cut off from one another. On cultural platforms, Shardaji, that is, Shrimati Sharda Sinha, presents her art in different languages of Bihar. In the same way, people speaking different languages and dialects remain in

communication with one another through everyday life, trade, travel and cultural interaction. These natural relationships also form the basis of literary dialogue.

Sanjeev Sinha: What opportunities and possibilities exist for new writers in Maithili literature?

J. P. Mandal: For a new writer, or for new writing, opportunity does not come from somewhere outside. Opportunity already exists within society. A writer's ability to recognise and use it depends upon his own vision.

An individual is not merely a unit of society but also a unit of the world. How a writer, through his writing, labour and vision, moves from reaching one person or ten people to reaching hundreds of thousands or millions is ultimately the writer's own responsibility. One should not merely wait for opportunity; one has to create opportunity through one's own work.

Literature is inseparable from society. As society exists, so does literature. As long as society exists, literature will exist. When society changes, the subjects, forms and needs of literature will change as well. There are therefore opportunities for new writers, and there will continue to be opportunities in the future. What is required is simply that they observe society carefully, develop their own vision and continue writing. For the moment, that is all.

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Glossary

Advaita – the philosophical doctrine of non-dualism.

Antyaja – a traditional term used for communities historically placed at the lower margins of the caste order.

Baisakh – a month of the traditional Indian calendar, falling roughly in April–May.

Bakasht – land retained or taken under the direct cultivation of a landlord in the former zamindari system.

Bigha – a traditional unit of land measurement whose size varies regionally.

Bhoodan – the land-gift movement associated with Vinoba Bhave.

Chaur – low-lying land that commonly retains water during the rainy season.

Dharma – duty, ethical order or righteous conduct, according to context.

Dvaita – the philosophical doctrine of dualism.

Dvaitadvaita – a philosophical position combining elements of dualism and non-dualism.

Gosauni – a term used in Mithila for a revered female deity or goddess in a particular devotional context.

Gosain – a religious or devotional appellation; its sense varies with context.

Jeth – a month of the traditional Indian calendar, falling roughly in May–June.

Kattha – a traditional unit of land measurement whose size varies regionally.

Kos – a traditional measure of distance.

Kush – a sacred grass used in Hindu ritual practices.

Mahajan – traditionally, a moneylender or wealthy creditor.

Mainjani – a customary caste-community system for regulating internal social affairs.

Marwa – the ritual wedding pavilion or designated ceremonial space used in marriage rites.

Maund – a traditional unit of weight.

Nirguna – literally "without attributes"; used especially for a conception of the divine beyond form and qualities.

Prasad – food or another offering consecrated to a deity and later distributed among devotees.

Pratiloma – a traditional term for a marriage or union regarded in classical caste theory as contrary to the prescribed hierarchical order.

Raiyati – relating to a cultivating tenant or raiyat and his landholding rights.

Samskara – a rite of passage or religious-cultural life-cycle observance.

Sawai – one and a quarter; here used for a traditional rate of repayment in grain-lending.

Sohar – a traditional song associated with childbirth.

Tilkor – a locally familiar creeper whose leaves are used as food in Mithila.

Upanayana – the traditional initiation ceremony associated

with the sacred thread.

Varna – the classical fourfold scheme of social classification.

Vishishtadvaita – the philosophical doctrine commonly described as qualified non-dualism.

Zamindar – a landlord or revenue-holder under the historical zamindari system.

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